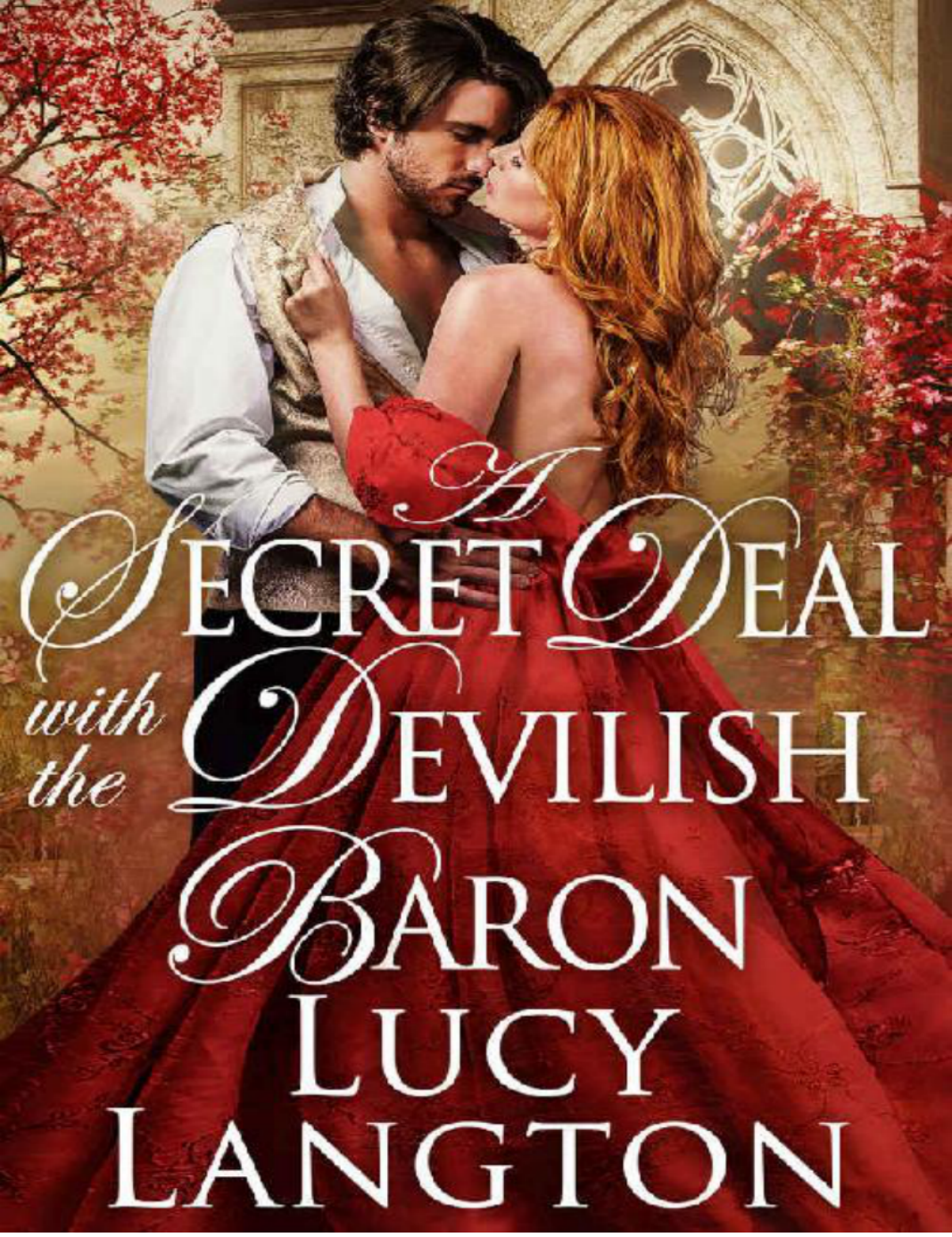

A Secret Deal with the Devilish Baron
Lucy Langton

A Secret Deal with the Devilish Baron

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

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Table of Contents

A Secret Deal with the Devilish Baron

Table of Contents

Free Exclusive Gift

A Secret Deal with the Devilish Baron

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

The Scandalous Life of a Betrayed Heiress

Introduction

Chapter 1

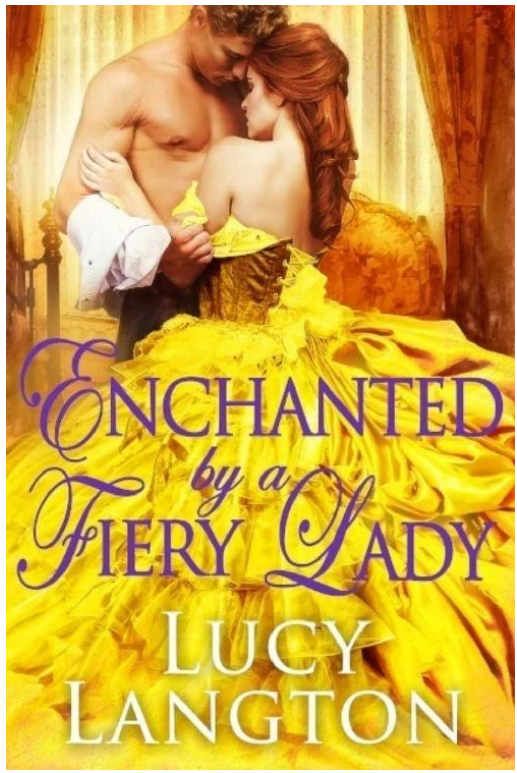
Chapter 2

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A Secret Deal with the Devilish Baron

Introduction

Isabel's world turns world upside down when she finds out her brother lost everything in gambling with the most notorious Baron in town. Fierce like a tiger, she storms into the Baron's estate to regain her pride and property, but instead of the scandalous scoundrel she expected to meet, she finds a broken man trying to hide his scars. Will she eventually be the one to heal his broken soul?

The legends about his bad behavior make the Baron, a person to be feared. When seeing Isabel and intrigued by her reckless personality, he offers a condition in return; she must be a companion to his ailing sister, and live in his estate until he says otherwise. But with every moment he shares with the passionate Isabel, Baron's bad manners soften into admiration…and more. Will he be able to handle the sizzling passion?

Isabel, surprisingly finds out that not everything is as it seems in the Baron's estate. As time goes by, she finds herself falling for the Baron's charm, but not before she berates him for his ignoble behavior. Will she be able to make him open his heart to love again? While everything seems to be going out of control, can Isabel take the reins and steer her life towards the future she dreams of?

Chapter 1

The barkeeper shuffled around the tables, stepping over a few wandering feet. Grumpy and tired from the day's work, he placed the tray of food on the table and went back to get the ale. Hopefully, they were the last of the tavern's customers that needed serving.

His wife had left him some hours ago to close the shed and bring in the clothes she had washed, but she was yet to return. He knew it was no doubt because of the rain.

Placing the mugs, he collected his money and returned to his stack of drinks. Just then, a heavily bearded man with a hat on his head and a large black coat draped over his frame, opened the door and walked in. Beads of raindrops fell from his clothes and beard. More came from his hat and coat as he took them off and hung them on a rack beside the door. The whole tavern grew still, everyone seemingly taken by the strange-looking man.

Huge and intimidating, he walked boldly towards the only vacant table left in the tavern. His wet hair covered most of his face, and he seemed to move, based on instinct rather than sight. Seated gracefully on his seat, he raised his head to catch the stares of a group of thuggish looking men in knights' armor seated at the opposite corner.

Ignoring them, he motioned to the barkeeper with his hands, as if he was giving a signal. Soon they all went on with their chattering. The barkeeper rang a little bell, and a young lady of no more than sixteen came out from an adjacent room. The barkeeper whispered something in her ear, and she left to return with a large plate of chicken wings, a plate of sauce, bread, and a mug of ale. She placed them down before the strange man's table. He made a grunting noise shooing her away.

One of the knights, Little Billy, stood up from his seat, slamming his mug on the table. He was almost bald, save for the few strands of dirty hair that clung to his scalp. He was tall, big, and muscular. His beard came down in an arch and was tied at the middle like that of an old

wizard, but on him, it made him appear menacing.

He walked towards the barkeeper, intimidating him with his height and build.

“Why were we given lesser portions of food when you clearly had so much for a common beggar?”

The bartender felt his hands shake beneath the napkin he held so tightly. Little Billy was not one to be trifled with, not even by other knights of his equal ranking. He knew this, and so did everyone else whose eyes he felt watching him.

“He’s a regular here. He always pays beforehand, and truly we served you and your party the best of what little we had,” the barkeeper replied.

“Well, my friends and I want some of what you just gave that beggar, and we want it now. On the house!” Little Billy demanded, much to the cheers of his friends.

The barkeeper closed his eyes for a moment, thinking of what to do or say. He knew he was in a dire situation. There was only a little bit of food left, and that was what he planned for his family as the rain was still falling in torrents and the woodshed must have had its fill of water. Cooking at this hour and with such resources would simply mean sleeping with a hungry belly.

“Let the barkeeper be!” came the croaky voice of the stranger.

Little Billy steered his head in the direction from whence the voice came. His friends stopped laughing, and there was an uneasy tension within the tavern.

“Did you just say something, stranger?” he asked.

The stranger took his time in replying. He dropped the last piece of meat onto the now empty plate of half-eaten bones. He wiped his hands with the napkin on the table and seemed to be searching for something on the floor.

Satisfied, he looked straight into Little Billy's eyes and repeated himself. "I said, let the barkeeper be."

At that, Little Billy scowled his face so hard his brows were almost touching. His friends, seeing his mood, stood up in unison to fight. The remaining customers remained seated. None seemed to be in the mood to interfere.

Provoked and in the company of his friends, Little Billy walked towards the stranger; strength, hatred, and boiling rage in every step. In a few seconds, the gap between Little Billy and the stranger was closed, and he stared down at the man, waiting for the next provocation so he could be justified as he unleashed his wrath.

"Say one more thing stranger, and you will feel the might of the renowned knight that can kill a hundred men with his bare hands, Sir Bill Murphy; the bone breaker!" said one of the little men that accompanied the acclaimed knight.

"Is that so?" replied the stranger.

He raised his head into the light, and only then did the men see his face. Their eyes met his, and the look on their faces changed dramatically from one of intimidation to that of recognition and fear. Tracing the hard unmistakable line that was a scar on his face, the men realised immediately whom exactly they were threatening.

One by one, his friends backed off, sneaking out of the tavern until only Little Billy was left standing. He stood there motionless and afraid, with his head bowed in remorse and regret. The stranger got

up from his seat and walked past Little Billy and towards the barkeeper.

“He’ll pay for the meal. Goodnight Fredrick,” he said and proceeded to get his coat.

The barkeeper bowed his head in respect and gratitude at the greeting. To him, it was pretty obvious that Little Billy had not guessed who he was insulting.

The customers were still quiet, unrecovered from the spectacle that had seen the mighty Billy stop short on making quick work of the stranger that was now leaving.

The rain had stopped now, and the moon and stars were beginning to display their breathtaking splendour.

“Goodnight, Lord William,” the barkeeper muttered barely audibly.

Chapter 2

The church was full to its capacity and even had some souls seeking penance, those most especially without a title that comes with an automatic seat reservation, standing at the far corners of the large building.

A young lady was seen clad in black with a shawl over her head as the older lady beside her bowed her head in prayer with the voice of the minister echoing through the large hall and over her head.

The Bishop blessed the holy bread, raised it high, so that all who looked upon the body of the one and true Christ may rise along with him and be worthy of his love and salvation. He muttered some words and proceeded with the ritual of the Holy Eucharist.

Isabel Montgomery, the young lady, closed her eyes and prayed for the forgiveness of her sins. She felt the overbearing presence of the lady beside her and forced herself to remain focused, just as her mother had taught. Although completely overwhelmed by sorrow and grief, she compelled her aching heart to plead the blessings and guidance of the merciful God.

Done with her prayers, she raised her head high, stood, and went to receive the body of her saviour. The bread felt stale and moist on her tongue, but she accepted it wholeheartedly. The walk back to her seat was more of instinct than will. Her thinking was gone. Her reasoning was gone. All that remained was the singular thought of the holy flesh about to find its way into her bowels and grant her immunity from the forces of evil and darkness that plagued the earth.

The rest of the mass mattered far less to young Isabel as the Bishop led it to a close. Towards the end, the congregation was reminded of the passing of the Montgomery family and how huge a loss it was for the community, county, and nation.

More plaudits were given to her dead parents whose bodies had only arrived the previous day and were going to be lowered into the grave the next day. Isabel detested these announcements, even more so now that it concerned her more personally than ever.

One by one, sympathizers came to offer their condolences while she was forced to remain seated, accepting them. She offered them a smile in return for their prayers and well wishes.

Once the last group was done offering their sympathy, she excused herself and exited the church. Outside, the sun was not yet out, and the clouds promised impending rain. Without her mother to act as her chaperone, Aunt Mariam had taken her place. Aunt Mariam was the oldest residing member of the family that was not really related to them by blood. She had been her mother's friend for as long as she could remember. Moreover, even though she was more of a family member than an outsider, Isabel found it still discomforting to walk the entire distance back home knowing her mother would not be around anymore.

Nevertheless, it gave her time to think. Her parents had been strong pillars of the community; highly active in the church, owners of various large farms that employed and paid nearly a hundred of the townsfolk. Her father was a nobleman and had befriended Dukes, Counts, and Barons too numerous to number.

They had travelled for the wedding of a cousin in a distant country, and on their return, had been unfortunate to encounter a raging storm that overturned and wrecked their ship. Only a few had survived. Now, their bodies laid in the morgue, being bathed with chemicals to reduce the stench of their rottenness.

Isabel shook her head at the displeasing thought. Tears welled in her eyes, but she bathed them away as she made the walk home. Aunt Mariam had not said much during the walk from the church, and Isabel was grateful for it.

There was the sound of hoofs and wheels as Isabel looked up to see a

man riding a horse and a carriage being drawn by another. Together, they looked like travellers, but she recognised the man riding the lone stallion. He was a Baron and went by the name Lord William Gregory. He was very popular in the province as a man of brute strength and immoral character.

There were tons of rumors circulating that he never went to church, that he frequented the ladies of the night, and his drinking and gambling habits. He truly had the most scandalous reputation.

This was the first time she was this close to him in public. Even without any other physical pointer, the long scar on his face was a telltale sign that he was a man that lived close to danger.

For the briefest second, their eyes met, and Isabel saw the stern look on his face and the unending depth of his eyes. She hurriedly looked away. Best to let sleeping dogs lie. No use thinking about someone else's business. She already had enough on her plate with her brother and all.

The clouds were angry now and were sure to pour out the contents of their belly anytime soon. Isabel thought herself wise she had not forgotten to bring along her umbrella.

The rain started just as they were entering the estate. It was as though some unseen forces had held it at bay until the last moment.

"Let me take that off you," Aunt Mariam said and left with the wet umbrella.

Isabel stared around the now empty house. Once upon a time, there was always something to look forward to, a ball, a feast, Thanksgiving, an anniversary, a promotion. Now Isabel sometimes caught the hidden stares of a few maids. There was no one to give them orders or tell them what to prepare.

She wondered where her brother was. Usually, when the head of the family becomes absent or unavailable, the first son takes up the responsibility of taking care of the house or estate. However, ever since their parents had travelled, her brother, George, had not been around to do anything seemingly responsible.

The next day would be the funeral ceremony of their late parents, and Isabel could already feel her shoulders cringing under the weight of both the emotional and physical pain of their absence. Sitting down, she laid her head back on the chair.

She did not know when she closed her eyes until she felt something warm covering her body. Opening her eyes, she found Aunt Mariam covering her with a thick cloth.

“Easy, my lady,” she said. “The weather is a bit chilling, and it would be best not to catch a cold tonight.”

Isabel was about to protest, but Aunt Mariam’s firm hands stilled her.

“Rest, My Lady. You know you’re going to need it for tomorrow’s ceremony.”

“But who is going to take care of the preparations? George has not been around for how long, and I don’t even know what to do!” Isabel whimpered.

“Do you honestly think that I would allow you bear the burdens alone? I have been like your sister ever since you were a little babe, have you not learned anything in all your nineteen years? And besides, left to you, what do you hope to accomplish in just a day?”

Isabel could not deny that what Aunt Mariam said made perfect sense. There was no use in arguing with her. However, she still felt guilty at letting her handle everything but knew there was little she could do to change anything.

All she could hope for was that once her brother returned, he would take responsibility for managing their property. From there they would decide on what next to do.

As Isabel drifted off to sleep, she felt a little spark of hope burning within her. Maybe, not all was lost yet.

The funeral ceremony sped much faster than Isabel had hoped. By early noon, the ceremony was nearly over. Isabel greeted and welcomed the sympathisers that had made it to the estate. They were all given food and drinks. She noted the presence of some powerful Dukes and Earls.

The Archbishop had also been in attendance but had left early with regard to some duties. If only the love and sympathy shown here were enough to bring back her parents, maybe then she would have been more appreciative.

Isabel glanced around in search of her brother, but he was nowhere to be found. She called on some of the guards and maids to help secretly search for her brother but was later told that he had left in the company of his friends some moments ago.

Isabel was sure it had not taken long for him to leave once the ceremony had ended. George had not even been on time. The Bishop had already begun the service when he had sneaked inside.

Calming her growing rage, she managed a smile or two for the few guests that were still present. Soon the rain began to fall in light showers, while the rest of the visitors took their leave. It was not long before a heavy downpour came crashing down and the sound of raindrops on the roofs seeped into corners of the house.

Aunt Mariam came to speak to her.

“How are you doing?” she asked.

“I am fine; I only need some time to rest and think. Thank you, Aunt Mariam, for your help in planning everything and taking care of the house until now. Only the heavens know what would have happened had you not been around to oversee the affairs,” Isabel replied.

“You need not thank me, My Lady. Had your mother still been alive, none of these would be necessary. Moreover, you did a lot too, yourself. I noticed you managed to keep a smiling face on, even when you seemed tired and weary,” Aunt Mariam commented.

“You noticed?” she asked, trying to keep her voice down. “If you noticed, surely others might have too.”

Aunt Mariam patted her shoulder in reassurance.

“Don’t worry My Lady; it is only the years I have spent with you that allows me to see your uneasiness. Fear not, you were amazing in hiding your displeasure,” Aunt Mariam consoled.

“By the way, I haven’t seen the young master in quite some time. Even for the funeral, he managed to come late.”

“I haven’t seen him since he left. And it bothers me. How do we help him if he is presently in an unfavourable situation?” Isabel asked, more angry than worried.

“The young master has his friends, and they seem to have his interests at heart too. I am sure they wouldn’t let anything wrong befall him in their presence!”

Aunt Mariam watched as Isabel's face gained some colour, and her heart gladdened.

Even as she had said those words, she prayed within her heart that George be safe. His recent disappearing acts had not only caused worry for her but also maids and servants as well.

Earlier that day, Lord William Gregory watched as the foolish young man left hurriedly with his friends. The young man had just lost half of his estate, but still he refused to give up. It was morning already, and he needed to have a bath and a change of clothes. Not that he cared for his physical appearance. His hair had grown past its usual boundary, and the hair on his face had not seen a razor for several days.

Fredrick changed the mug of ale before the Baron and silently made his way back to his stand. William took the mug and drank a grateful gulp. It felt good to drink after acquiring more property. Hopefully, the stupid lad would see some sense and never gamble again.

He vaguely remembered he had an event that he was required by status to attend. A beloved family of the community had just lost both parents in a shipwreck and they were having a funeral service. William frowned as he thought of the insincere love and sympathy the children would be receiving.

He hated death. He hated the fact that there was nothing one could do concerning the inevitable finality that only death could bring. No amount of trying, or hiding, or even riches could stay the hand of death. A thought crossed his mind and no sooner had it appeared than he flung it aside, slamming his fists on the table in the process.

William bowed his head in resignation. Death was close to him, pushing, breathing, so close that he could almost feel its cold embrace.

It had not taken long to him, but soon the stupid lad was back. However, this time, without any of his much more reasonable friends. The Baron stared at him long and hard. He stood there, before his table, panting and wet. No doubt the lad had entered into the rain and ran as fast as he could just to return in time.

“What do you want kid? I have already told you to bring me the deed to your house. So what are you doing here?” the Baron demanded.

The young man stood there, staring at the Baron. It was clear that he was obviously intimidated, but there was a strong sense of determination in his defiant posture. With shaky hands, he unhooked the pouch he carried and handed the Baron the deeds to his family’s estate.

“I challenge you one more time. This time, if I win, I get all my family’s estate back as well as the property of my other friends that they lost to you,” the young man said.

The Baron closed his eyes and rubbed his beard as he considered the young man’s request. It seemed the young lad had yet to learn anything about how harsh life could be. And the fact that he was doing all of this just days after his parents had died infuriated him. It was clear that his other friends had learnt the bitter truth of losing, but this spoilt brat was so pampered he did not realise the magnitude of what he was about to do.

The Baron closed his eyes to try to control his rage. There was only one way to discipline young children that had no idea of how cruel the world might be.

When the Baron raised his head, he had a smile on his face.

“If you do win, I promise to give you all of your property as well as those of your friends. But, on one condition.”

He paused to see if the impact of his words would show on the lad's face. The boy was indeed struggling to keep his composure. His hands shook now and then; his face looked even sweatier than when he came into the tavern drenched in rain.

"On the condition that, since it would cost me all of my earnings if I lose, then, if I win, apart from taking the rest of your property contained in this deed, you lose the rights to all your titles. Do you accept?"

The demand was unreasonable. The stakes were too high. The Baron secretly prayed that the boy would sense the intensity of this wager and beg rather than gamble. There was no need for him to be a hero. All he had to do was beg. If only he would simply beg.

Contrary to the Baron's hopes, the lad looked even more determined, and once he saw the look in the boy's eyes, he knew he had been wrong from the beginning; this lad would need to be taught about the evils in the world.

Bold and determined, the young man extended his arm in agreement. The Baron simply gave a mocking laugh and joined him in the agreement. Then he signalled to the barkeeper to bring two mugs of ale.

Once the ale was present, he asked the barkeeper, "Fredrick my good man, did you by any chance listen to the conversation between me and this young man here?"

"Yes, My Lord," he answered.

"And can you once again bear witness to this deal should any matter arise to its validity?" the Baron asked again.

“Yes, My Lord,” the barkeeper answered again.

“Good. Thank you Fredrick, that will be all.” Turning to the young lad he said, “Let us begin!”

Chapter 3

Isabel sat listening to her brother recount the absurd tale of how he had lost the family not only their property but also their dignity and honour. It took all of her willpower not to lash out at her brother who for all the wrong reasons looked more despicable than ever.

One of the manservants had found him drunk and drenched by the rain, wandering close to the gate and had helped him into the estate. They had alerted Aunt Mariam who had been with Isabel at the time. Once they had him brought into the house and close to a fire, he had begun apologizing.

Further enquiry had caused him to divulge how he had begun spending some of the money got from the inheritance with his friends. They had only been drinking at first when one of them had made a wager with the Baron and lost.

George, in all his childish benevolence, had insisted on reclaiming his friend's property and had ended up losing all the money he had on him. Then trying to win the money back, he wagered on assets and property. In the end, he had lost everything, trying to win back something. Now, the Baron could be on their neck anytime soon to demand his right to claim his winnings.

The first thing Isabel had done once she heard he had lost the house was to land a right-handed slap on her brother's cheek. But once she heard everything, especially the fact that the Baron could arrive anytime to chase them out, she gave up on her brother's salvation.

To her, he was only a little bit away from being dead to her. Isabel knew her brother was in no position to do anything more to save the family. She knew she had no way of trusting him with anything from then on.

Sad and dejected, she ran to her room and cried herself to bed.

A few hours later, she woke up with a mild headache, and all the events of the past two days flooded her mind. Her hands shook as she remembered her mother, Catherine, and all the different times her mother had taken care of situations she thought were too difficult.

Isabel wiped the tears that had been threatening to fall. She looked herself up in the mirror. Her eyes were a bit swollen and sore from all her crying. She loved her brother so much, but his foolishness had cost the family the only thing their parents had left them.

Isabel thought long and hard. With their parents gone, the inheritance they left behind was all they had. Letting their inheritance fall into the hands of that notorious Baron was the worst thing that could have happened at this moment.

Slowly but surely, Isabel realised that if anyone were to change the fate of the family, it would be her. Right now, her brother was of no use, and this was not a matter that Aunt Mariam could intercede on their behalf. She simply lacked the social standing.

No! If anyone had the littlest chance of overturning the stupid wager, it was she.

Fuelled by her conviction and determination, she peeped through the curtains to see that there was daylight already. *Good,* she thought. She had only one thought in her mind, and that was to get back her inheritance from the Baron, William Gregory, no matter how bleak the situation looked. At least if she should leave now, there was little chance that she would be seen by anyone. The day had yet to break fully.

Quickly, Isabel ran out of her room and down the stairs, taking them two at a time. Aunt Mariam came out, just as Isabel dashed out through the door and into the stables.

“Get my horse ready for me!” Isabel ordered the stable boy.

He looked at her, puzzled. In all his time of service to the Montgomery household, Isabel had developed a habit of taking a horse for riding anytime she pleased and without any forewarning. However, this time around, she looked like she was in such a hurry; he was prompted to address her.

“I have a matter to discuss with Lord Gregory,” Isabel replied.

“My Lady, I advise against it. The Baron is a man of ill reputation, and his character justifies the rumours that swell around town. At the very least, allow Lady Mariam to accompany you. Please My Lady, I plead with you!”

“Jack, your family has served mine for many years, and I can even remember growing up to see you here at the stables daily. What makes you believe I have not given thought to all you say? For now, I will have to reject your advice,” Isabel said and climbed the saddled horse.

By the time Isabel was out of the stables, Aunt Mariam was close at hand. Isabel noticed she was panting, having crossed the distance in such a short time. Following quickly after her, she found Isabel on her mounted horse and about to take off.

“My Lady, where are you heading to at this time? Or, wait, let me accompany you!” Aunt Mariam screamed as she rushed to Isabel.

All Aunt Mariam wore was her nightwear and a scarf wrapped around her neck and arms. Isabel, on the other hand, was a bit more prepared. There was no need endangering Aunt Mariam any more than was necessary.

“Don’t worry, Aunt Mariam. I am going to get our family out of the mess that my brother has put us in. Take care of the house till I

return. I won't be long!" Isabel yelled back.

And with that, she was gone. She pushed the horse as fast as it could go. Galloping past the streets and onto the road that would lead to the estate of the Baron, Lord William Gregory.

The thought of what her servant had said pestered her as she rode towards the Baron's abode. She could not stop thinking about what the rumors said about the mysterious Lord. How could a Lord such as himself fall to such a level?

She had oftentimes wondered if all the rumours were true. Did he really frequent ladies of the night? Most men were guilty of drinking and gambling. However, did he not know that as a Lord he was to be of an upright character? What must have happened to him to cause him to fall to such levels of depravity?

Suddenly, she looked up to see the outline of a large estate in the distance. It covered as much land as four times that of her family's estate. Surrounded by forests and trees, the Gregory estate was like an alien amid so much greenery.

Unconsciously she began rethinking her actions. What if coming to the Baron's house had been a mistake. Suddenly, the impact of her actions seemed to dawn on her, and there was a swell in her throat. Was not this the same step her brother had taken that had ended up backfiring and he had lost everything in the end?

Would the same fate befall her? How could she hope to do any better at convincing this Lord of handing back all their property than her brother who had tried and failed woefully? The fear now gnawed at her heart, and she forced the horse to slow down to a trot.

She had not given this as much thought as she would have liked. What would she say to the Baron that could possibly change his mind? Or rather, what could she offer?

Exasperated, she looked up to the clouds in search of an answer. She prayed to her parents if they could hear her. A tear fell off her eye and onto her cheeks.

As though in answer to her prayer, a cool breeze accompanied by a gentle wind swirled around her, calming her racing heart. Something deep within her moved, and she felt a gratifying satisfaction.

There was no need to think of what to do now. She would confront the Baron, and then the words would find a way to reach his heart. No man was made of stone. Moreover, what more could she lose?

With her conviction once again strengthened, every other thought evaporated out of her mind. Charging down the road, she rode like a bull that had marked its target and would get to it. However, no one was going to succeed in stopping her. She was going to get back her father's property, no matter what it took!

Chapter 4

Lord William watched from the balcony of his third-floor building, a woman wearing a blue dress and riding a horse. She looked enchanting in her dress, and the wind did little to stop the dance of her hair as she sped past the gates, racing as though with great urgency.

She brought her stead to a stop just a few feet from the front porch. William could not deny that she was indeed beautiful. She looked rich and familiar like the daughter of a nobleman or Duke. However, there was no resemblance to the Dukes he was familiar with.

This one above all sparked his interest. For her to have charged into his dwelling, unaccompanied, then she was bold. Not just bold, there must be something in his possession that she desired so badly; otherwise, he would make her regret coming there alone. He would need to find out more about her.

Meanwhile, Isabel wasted no time in climbing down from her horse and watched as her beast was taken and led to the stables by one of the servants. Another servant emerged from within the house and without asking any questions, led her into the main building.

She was a bit taken aback by their approach to her situation as none of the servants reacted as one would expect when a stranger suddenly rides up unannounced. Could it be that they were exhibiting the same nonchalant character that the Baron was known for?

Clasping her hands together, she made a silent prayer for herself and also for the servants of this depraved man. For he must have corrupted the servants with his evil ways.

Bracing herself for the confrontation with the Baron, she accompanied the servant past the huge door and into the house. The interior of the house was deeper and larger than what Isabel had imagined. She

looked up to the roof as the housekeeper led her up the stairs. The roof seemed to reach to endless heights. They swirled up from floor to floor. It was the first time Isabel had seen anything like it.

Everywhere was dim, and she at one time struggled to find the next step. The housekeeper led her into a room that was too dark for her to see anything. Then, Isabel was left standing at the door as the housekeeper proceeded to open the curtains.

Due to staying in the dim lighting, her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness. So when the light came pouring in, she had to shield her eyes with her hands. Soon after her eyes recovered, she found herself in a large living room. Larger than the one in which she had grown up.

The furnishings were something else entirely too. The floor was made of pure oak, and she could see the materials within the room were of the finest quality. There were numerous valuable items placed carefully about the room that it looked more gracious and homely than she had ever thought was possible except for a person of royalty.

The more she saw of the Baron's house, the more she admired his taste. The housekeeper excused herself to announce her presence to the Baron. Alone in the room, Isabel, roamed aimlessly, touching and feeling the vases, chairs, and shelves. One shelf contained many books on astrology and military tactics. It also had books on Greek mythology and the mysteries of science.

Isabel could not stop herself from thinking. Could it be that the Baron loved to read? On the other hand, was this just another of his collections, acquired through his nefarious acts?

Although her determination had not wavered, Isabel felt a growing feeling of unease at the sort of meeting she would have with the Baron. Unconsciously, she walked towards the window, and what she saw made her gasp.

Holding onto the curtains, she balanced herself to keep from falling while using her free hand to cover the gaping hole that was her mouth. Her eyes widened at the spectacle before her, and it was only by sheer will did she manage to hold her ground.

Surprise evident on her face she wondered why she had not seen this before when she had stepped into the estate. Then she realised she had carelessly sped past all the forests, trees, and bushes without giving them a second thought.

Now, looking from the first-floor window, Isabel could see the beauty and colourful organisation of trees and bushes and flowers to create a euphoric atmosphere. There was not a single person who could gaze on the intricate design and not marvel at its creative splendour.

Isabel chuckled. Who exactly was Lord William Gregory? For someone with such a reputation, no one would suspect him to be a lover of nature and her gifts. Then she smiled some more. For some reason, she wanted to spend a little more time looking at the scenery. What other surprises did the Baron have that he so carefully kept away from general knowledge?

For more than ten minutes, Isabel admired the scenery. It was not until she noticed the brightness of the sun did she discover that she had been waiting for a response for quite some time. Storming out of the room in anger, she met the housekeeper about to enter an adjacent room.

“I demand to be taken to meet Lord William. Now!” Isabel exploded.

Her youthful countenance and pious look did little to hide her blazing anger at being kept waiting. To her, it was an insult to her person and status.

The housekeeper attempted to warn Isabel of the dangers of approaching the Baron at that hour, but Isabel was already furious. She would not be kept waiting any longer.

Resigned, the housekeeper led Isabel further up the stairs and into a room, which to Isabel's dismay, would be the Baron's bedchamber. The Baron had predicted it. She had found the lady angry and annoyed, demanding to be taken to him. Just as he had predicted.

Now they ascended the stairs, she taking each step one at a time, and the young lady walking impatiently behind her.

William heard the sounds of their shoes clapping on the wooden floor, informing him of their ascent towards the topmost floor, knowing full well their destination would be the very room at which he lounged. With the intention of taking away the young lady's composure, he remained shirtless while he lay on his bed.

There was a knock at first before his housekeeper opened the door for the young lady to walk into the room. William remained on his bed and watched the expression on the lady's face transform immediately from one of anger and confidence to one of shock and embarrassment.

Isabel had never seen the bare chest of an adult male exposed so carelessly that she could not hide her reaction at finding the Baron in such a condition. She had suspected the Baron of being a man of vile means, but this display clearly showed that he truly was the man described by the rumours she had heard.

Calming her emotions, she forced herself to look rather than shy away, which she suspected would please the unscrupulous lord.

The housekeeper, uncomfortable with the situation tried to ease her way out of the room, but the Baron stopped her.

"Stay!" he ordered. "We wouldn't want to damage the fair lady's reputation by leaving her alone with me."

Isabel was astounded that such a man could care for her reputation. Moreover, within her, she wondered what sort of a man the Baron was.

"Speak now!" William commanded the mute Isabel. "What do you want so much that you would dare charge into my estate demanding my presence? What business do I have with you that you would be as bold as to march into my chambers? Speak, girl!"

The Baron was being bold and authoritative. A complete contrast to the caring gesture he had demonstrated by protecting her honour. However, Isabel was unmoved by his ordering. She had expected this.

"My name is Isabel Montgomery, daughter of Paul and Catherine Montgomery. I was informed last night that my brother, George, had made a wager with you for my family's estate and lost. Regardless of the outcome of that wager, I am here to make you forfeit your claim to my father's estate and return whatever document my brother may have given you."

Isabel tightened her grip on her dress to keep her hands from shaking. The Baron was truly an intimidating man. She had known speaking to him would be difficult, but she had not expected it to put her under such pressure.

Meanwhile, the Baron seemed to consider her words. It was true he did not need the property gained from the wager. Nevertheless, it was necessary for him to teach that stupid lad a lesson about life.

Now, he looked at Isabel, and a thought crossed his head. It was a gamble, but the risk was worth it. For him, there was nothing more to lose. However, he would need to be crafty. Isabel would never agree to his plan unless he outsmarted her.

"So that pathetic loser is your brother. I admit I do not need another flimsy run-down property to drain my pockets in upkeep and taxes, but that does not mean that I cannot sell it for profits. Your brother

was foolish to use your family fortune in a gamble, especially when his father's body is yet to touch the cold earth. If you so believe I should hand it over, let me know why. I won it honestly. So, now, tell me."

The Baron folded his hands and let Isabel do the talking. She looked beautiful, to say the least. Her red hair glistened in the sunlight. Every inch of her radiated elegance and class. Save for the hem of her dress, which had probably been smeared by mud from all the horse riding.

Her face was oval-shaped, and her skin shone. Her hands looked soft and small like a little child's. William guessed her age to be between seventeen and nineteen. Her face had an innocent look except for when she glared at him as she had done while she entered his bedchamber.

She was of above-average height for a girl in these parts; he assumed he was probably seven to eight inches taller than she was. However, she had a fiery passion that burned within her, and William knew that in that state, she could be dangerous.

Overall, she was a very interesting woman, one who was both beautiful and tenacious. And daring. Nothing other than that would have made her charge into his estate unannounced and without a chaperone or a servant. Interesting indeed!

Isabel stared at the Baron without words to say. This was what she had feared while riding through the town. What could she say to such a man? What could she offer him? Or, how could she persuade him to renounce his claim to their property without her losing her pride and dignity?

"My father left us his house, and the documents my brother handed over to you contain most of our inheritance. You would be taking away our livelihood by forcing us to prepare for acquisition. In addition, please, refrain from further damaging my brother's reputation by calling him names. All I want is for things to return to the way they were," Isabel confessed.

The Baron admired her courage, but he was yet to get what he wanted. From her last words, he knew she loved her brother greatly and her family even more. However, he knew she was almost there; all that remained was a little shove.

“I have listened to what you have to say, and I see why you would need your properties back, but why should I give them back? What do I get in return for such a gesture?” he asked.

Isabel was dismayed by his question. The Baron was openly asking for a sort of repayment or compensation for him to return their estates. She had suspected it might come to this but had silently prayed that at least some of the rumours about him were not true.

“While I was coming, I had told myself I was going to do whatever it took to retrieve my father’s estate, and that I am still prepared to do. I admit I had heard rumours about you, most of them say vile things about you. However, I had hoped that by coming here I would give you a chance to show that you are not who they say you are. However, today I have been proven wrong.”

William was getting fed up with the insults. Yes, he was used to being labelled and given names. Most of the townsfolk knew him as the scandalous Lord rather than his actual name. However, getting insulted in his home was not something he was going to take lightly.

Isabel watched him as he thought. It seemed there was no other option. She looked at the housekeeper standing by the door and once again at the Baron. Slowly, her hand went to her shoulders, and she began pulling her dress. When she spoke, her voice was shaky as she struggled to hold back the emotion welling within her.

“The rumours say you frequent various brothels and have numerous lovers. So I offer you what you want; my body in exchange for your renouncing your claim on my father’s property.”

The Baron was astounded. Of all things, he had never thought this young and beautiful lady would offer herself so willingly, all for the sake of keeping her family's inheritance. Nevertheless, this was not what he wanted at the moment. Letting her continue would only spark further rumours to taint his reputation and her honour.

Besides, from the look on his housekeeper's face, this was an audacious move. He was almost smiling as he stopped her.

"Why stop now? Isn't this what you want?" Isabel asked, anger and humiliation burning in her eyes.

William smirked. "While I do in fact appreciate your tempting and generous offer, I humbly decline. That isn't what I want, at least, not now."

Relieved but still cautious, she asked, "What then do you want in return for giving up your rights? Since you already have something in mind, tell me!"

William noted again, bold.

"I have a young lady living within this house, my sister. When she was born, she had been so young and lively. After sometime, she developed a sickness which upon various developments, she confined herself to her chambers. What I want from you is to stay with her as a companion until her condition improves. Immediately she is once again lively and cheerful you would be allowed to leave. However, not until then. That is my only offer."

Isabel was shocked by what she had heard. No one had ever made mention that the Baron had a relative, not to mention a sister. And besides, his offer seemed too trivial that she wondered if the Baron did not have something else in mind.

“Is that all? Nothing else?” Isabel asked.

“Of course. All you have to do is keep my sister company, and your estate will be returned to you. However, you are aware you would have to live here temporarily as my sister might require comfort and companionship at odd hours. Nevertheless, I promise that your honour shall be unharmed as long as you live under my roof,” William explained.

Isabel sighed; it was a good bargain. The only problem would be how to break the news to Aunt Mariam. Of course, her brother would be concerned, as would anyone who would hear of the development. However, her mind was made up, and if that simple task would ensure her family’s security, then so be it.

“I accept your request,” Isabel confirmed.

“Good! My maid will escort you to your horse; it should already be waiting for you by the time you get outside. You will return here whenever you decide, but not later than a week from now. One of your servants will accompany you here and return with the documents I got from your brother. Once you are settled in, I will introduce you to my sister, and you can carry on from there,” William concluded.

Isabel closed her eyes for a few seconds to absorb the new information and to resign herself to her fate. She reminded herself that she had chosen to do this, and this was the best possible outcome for them both.

With the housekeeper leading the way, they climbed back down. When they got outside, true to his word, her horse was waiting for her; brushed up and fed. She looked towards where she suspected to be the Baron’s window.

Satisfied, she mounted her horse and began the journey back.

Chapter 5

Lord William stood watching from about his window as Isabel mounted her horse and sped off in the direction from whence she came. He watched as she bounced gracefully atop her horse, her hair rising and falling behind her back as she galloped out of sight.

Even in her stubbornness and fiery defiance for habits accustomed to ladies of her status, William found her even more amusing. She reminded him of himself – proud and daring, unwilling to be bound by ensnaring customs or norms.

He looked at Isabel and could see a faint resemblance to his sister.

Beatrice Gregory, who had been afflicted by a terrible illness when she was young, had been forced to endure months of treatments and medicines in a bid to cure her sickness. Being so young, she had been refused her friends, and most times, been confined to her room to avoid the sickness from worsening or spreading.

Having spent close to five years battling the disease, Beatrice had finally been cured, but the effects it had on her were tremendous. During the whole period Beatrice had been confined, she had not been allowed any friend and companion, and this had caused her to grow socially distant.

She hardly talked to anyone, and even though she was free to do as she pleased, she seldom left her room. It was as though she had grown accustomed to the confinement and was reluctant to change. The doctors diagnosed it as ‘nervous disposition’. However, her brother, William, knew better. He believed it to be his punishment.

He had tried visiting her in her chambers once, but she had shouted and screamed at the top of her lungs. Taking the blame for her present condition, William had hardened his heart as his penance to his sister.

She was proud, bold, and beautiful. A fitting character to match his own. He smiled. Isabel might be the most challenging woman he had ever encountered. And that singular thought made his blood race. What would happen once she started living under the same roof as he did? Would she be different from all the other ladies he had ever been with, or would she, like the others, treat him with deceit and disdain because of his reputation?

Nevertheless, his sister would now have a friend and companion that could, hopefully, bring her back from her state of torment. They looked alike, were almost of the same age and height. With a few days and moments together, William was sure they would develop a bond. A bond strong enough to heal.

Unsure of what his heart wanted, William turned around to lie on his bed. It was only then that he noticed the housekeeper had returned to his bedchambers.

“Instruct the cleaners to prepare the best and closest room available to my sister’s, for the Lady Isabel. Also, tell the maids to get all the linens washed and fresh. We will be having a lovely guest for a while, and I have every intention of impressing her!” William ordered.

He noticed the housekeeper about to argue, and his expression changed. Without any further hesitation, she hurried out of the room to carry out his instructions.

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Isabel arrived back at her home, much to the relief and satisfaction of Aunt Mariam and George. Having awoken hours after Isabel had departed, he was confronted by Aunt Mariam, who disclosed the whereabouts of his sister and her intentions.

Although grateful for the intervention and return of his sister, George was more concerned about the outcome of her venture. Should she have failed to convince the Baron, they would have to abandon their lives and home to probably live with a relative far away from this place.

However, if she were successful, he would be forever indebted to her for delivering them out of the muddle he had put them in. Even as he prayed for her success, he knew deep within that the Baron would never relinquish his hold over the estates without having something else in return. On the other hand, was it possible that his sister had managed to convince the Baron to make a wager and had then been successful where he had failed?

With the numerous thoughts and questions flooding his head, George shook his head so he could think properly. His sister had just returned. First, he would welcome her back, and later on, he would apologise for putting the family in danger, regardless of the outcome of her confrontation.

Isabel had hoped to, at least, be able to rest and eat before divulging the result of her visit, but Aunt Mariam was not one to delay an announcement.

“Tell me all that happened while you were at that devious man’s house. Did he touch you? Did he intimidate or threaten you? Please tell me and calm my agitated mind,” Aunt Mariam coerced.

Cornered, Isabel felt no other choice than to report all that had happened while at the Baron’s estate. She explained everything except the part where she had offered herself in exchange for the property. She felt it would rather bring shame and discomfort to the ones she cared about rather than prove the point she wanted to make.

“…and I would be living there with him and his sister until she can get more cheerful and well,” Isabel explained.

Aunt Mariam closed her eyes as she thought of the different possible outcomes of Isabel going to live with a man of such reputation and character. No doubt, her reputation would be stained, but it would mean the mistakes of her brother would be recovered. However, she thought of other means through which they could recover their land without Isabel ever going to live with the Baron.

Meanwhile, tired and hungry, Isabel slumped in her chair. Taking note of her weariness, George signalled for a servant to supply her with food and water. Isabel did not waste anytime devouring the meal as she abandoned some of her table etiquette. She often did.

The next few days passed swiftly, and Isabel credited it to the anticipation she felt for leaving. She was not very enthusiastic about living with the Baron, but for the fact that the estate would be returned, she was content.

During this time, Isabel noticed a great change in her brother's countenance. George had become more humble and sober. Chagrined by his previous lack of control and poor judgement, which had almost led to the loss of their home, George had totally ended his involvement with drinking and gambling.

Whenever Isabel caught sight of her brother, he was a bit downcast and seldom smiled. However, things had begun changing within the estate. The duties he had run from and abandoned, he now carried out with proficiency and rigour.

For one thing, Isabel was glad that the experience had changed him, at least for the better. Now, she could actually believe she had made the right call. If things went the way she believed they would, their estates would be returned to them, her brother would step up to become a better person and Lord, and she would… Well, she would be satisfied knowing her family was well and awaited her return.

Unconsciously, a tear had escaped her eyelids, and Isabel hurried to wipe it off. There was no need shedding tears. What was done was

done. Her only worry at that moment was that the Baron kept to his promise.

George stood within the shadows, watching his sister for quite some time, and he did not fail to notice when she batted a tear from her cheeks. He still felt guilty about all that had happened, and even though he had done all that in his moment of weakness, it did not change the fact that he had almost jeopardised the family's security.

"Isabel, may I have a word with you?" George asked.

Isabel was taken aback. She had not noticed George walking up to her. Either way, she followed him till they were out of earshot and then he spoke:

"I know that the past few days have been tough for our family but most especially on you. When our parents died, I was so saddened by their death that I began to take comfort in wine and gambling, which ultimately almost led to the loss of our inheritance. I take full responsibility for my actions, and I apologise for once again putting you in a position where you would have to redeem me."

George paused, and Isabel could see the emotion in his eyes and voice as he spoke. Without a doubt, he was truly sorry and repentant. She held no grudge towards him, and she wanted him to know that. However, she felt he needed to say what he had in his mind first. Before her brother could be truly healed, he needed to forgive himself first.

"I want to ask once again that you forgive me for putting you in that position. And when you do journey to fulfill your end of the bargain, know that I am always at your disposal. Whenever you need me, just send a word, and I will be by your side in an instant. I will not hesitate to come to your aid at any time, now and always. I swear it!" George finished and bumped his fist on his chest to show his resolve.

Isabel was beyond happy at her brother's resolve. She was proud and

glad that something good had already begun manifesting, even before she had made the journey to the Baron's estate. Now, whatever would happen, she knew that everything was going to be alright.

She rushed into her elder brother's arms, and they were locked in an embrace for a while. Ever since their parents' death, this was the first time either of them was being intimate with the other. Isabel could not deny that she had missed the warm feeling that came with the reassuring hug of family.

"Brother, you do not know how long I have waited for you to tell me all this. You are my brother, and there is no way I would harbour a grudge against you for so long. Indeed, what you did caused me grief for a while, as our parents had just been buried and you had abandoned your duties as their heir. Nevertheless, I have completely forgiven you of everything, and it is all in the past now. My only wish is that during the time that I am gone, you take care of the affairs of our father and yourself. Do not neglect your duties anymore. And of course, Aunt Mariam will be here to make sure that you have all that you need," Isabel admonished.

Both brother and sister had a difficult time hiding their tears from each other. For the rest of that day, she and George had smiles on their faces. Aunt Mariam noticed what had happened and was certain that the family was going to overcome the events that had troubled them. Her only fear was what might happen once Isabel began living with the Baron.

However, that was beyond her control now. In any case, she pitied the Baron, should he try anything to jeopardise Isabel's reputation. Isabel was both tenacious and quite unpredictable. If anything were to befall her, she would rise above it and conquer. That, she was sure of.

The next morning, Isabel was ready to say her goodbyes. The maids and servants were all outside, waiting to bid her farewell. George and Aunt Mariam stood together as she climbed into her carriage. This time, she was going to the Baron's estate as a proper lady would, and although Aunt Mariam and George had requested to accompany her at least until she disembarked, she had bluntly refused. Having them

come along would only cause her to cry when they left, and that was a side she was unwilling for the Baron to see. If she were to put up with living with him for the next few weeks, then she must be seen as someone strong and competent.

Done with the pleasantries and farewells, Isabel began her journey to the Baron's estate. She had heard many things about him, some good, but most were negative. However, she had met him once, and during their encounter, she had noticed a side to him that although hidden, had the potential to grow into something unique and amazing.

What would she encounter in her stay at the Baron's house? Would he be the man the rumours said he was, or would she find a man different from what the public knew of him? Well, there was only one way to find out, she would have to see things for herself.

Chapter 6

Lord William sat and watched from his window all day awaiting the arrival of Lady Isabel. His lunch had been left half-eaten, and he could not deny that he was feeling uneasy. He was yet to lay his eyes on her, yet he already felt anxious and apprehensive.

Twice, while the servants had been preparing the room, he had walked in to inspect; checking for stains and old furnishings and art he felt would seem distasteful in her eyes. He would walk up to a vase to examine it, he would randomly check for dust particles or the slightest mistake in alignment and would order it to be redone.

For him, Isabel was to feel welcomed and comfortable when she arrived. Moreover, making her bedchamber the most inviting was the least he could do as a host.

He heard rather than saw the carriage pull into his estate and stop at his front door. Immediately, he checked himself and rearranged his attire. He walked out of his room and down the stairs with the most grace he could muster.

Contrary to his usual dressing, he had worn one of his favourite clothes; one that contained more than a dozen buttons and lapel pins. He looked like an army general, only this time without the military decoration.

Getting down from the carriage with the help of a footman, Isabel noticed the large door leading into the Baron's house swing open. She saw the Baron smiling weirdly and wearing a funny coat. She assumed it had been a while since he had been to any event, as his coat was old- fashioned and lacked taste.

Nevertheless, she was not to alert him to his own mistake. If his servants saw nothing wrong in his dressing, neither would she.

Ignoring him, she turned around to appraise her surroundings and had to cover her gaping mouth with a hand fan she had brought along, much by the insistence of Aunt Mariam. Her heart fluttered along with the butterflies that perched from one flower to another. Isabel had been quite exposed as a child, travelling on most occasions with her mother to see their relatives, going along with her father to visit some Lords in their manor and many more occasions, such as attending the balls with the ladies.

However, one thing that shocked her still was that none of those Lords or places she had visited or toured had ever had such a generous display of trees and flowers of such variety and vast quantity. From more than four miles, Isabel had feasted her eyes on the beautiful array of wildflowers shadowed by the presence of tall trees separating them from the path.

Isabel admired the scenery before her eyes, promising herself to pay the plants a visit once she was settled in the Baron's house. The path that led to the main building was decorated with cedar, cinnamon, and numerous other trees that gave the environment a spicy, yet delectable scent.

All around them were plants of different types and species. At first, Isabel wondered why she had not noticed the extremely pleasing environment when she had initially arrived at the Baron's house. Then almost as quickly as the thought came, she remembered her mind was troubled and unsteady.

The mental struggle to secure her family's inheritance had burdened her so, that she had not been able to appreciate the tasteful atmosphere fully. Now, that her mind was partially at rest, she could feel and smell the wonders of nature.

Deep within her heart, Isabel was grateful that she could spend some time here; at least the environment would offer her comfort in her leisure.

Approaching the main building, Isabel remembered the reason for her stay and gave a straightened face. It would not be in her favour to allow the Baron to see her charmed by his décor, lest he think she was easy to please.

One of the servants went for her luggage while another handed her a folder. It contained the documents that her brother had surrendered to the Baron in exchange for losing their wager. She perused through them and finally settled that it was indeed intact. She handed it over to her footman with a note to her brother. Then she began the walk through the steps until she came face to face with the Baron.

“Miss Montgomery,” William greeted in salutation.

“Lord Gregory,” Isabel greeted in return.

“You are officially welcome to my home. During your stay here, my servants will attend to you as though they were yours. Whatever you need or whatever questions you have, you only need ask, and I will answer them. My housekeeper here, Rachael, will show you to your bedchamber and whatever you need as a Lady, you have only to ask her.” William paused to let his words sink in.

Isabel gave no response, and the Baron took that to mean she understood.

“Dinner will soon be ready, and I expect you to be there. The servants will alert you as to when it is done. Later on, I will introduce you to my sister. It is my wish that you two become friends, as that is the entire purpose for which you are here. Do have a lovely evening, My Lady,” he finished and strode in the direction Isabel knew to be his bedchambers.

She followed loosely behind Rachael, taking note of the different doors and passageways around the house. If she were going to live there for more than a month, she had to know her way around. It would be useless and time-wasting to always have to rely on his

servants whenever she needed something.

They walked past different rooms and passages, at Isabel's insistence. They finally arrived at a room on the second floor, and Rachael pointed out that this was her room.

"What about that one over there?" Isabel asked.

Not too far from her new living space, was a large room, painted separately from the rest she had seen. It had drawings of little rabbits and cats; it looked like it was once used as a children's room.

"Oh, that is Lady Beatrice's room. It's one of the largest in the entire building, and no servant is permitted to enter, except it is necessary," Rachael answered.

Isabel was intrigued. She wondered why all the other floors had freshly covered paint except this one. Painting this floor would mean covering the drawings, and Isabel assumed the drawings held much significance to the Lady Beatrice for it to have received special treatment.

Isabel knew that if she were to become friends with the young girl, and gain her freedom soon, she would have to gain the young girl's trust. Gaining her trust would mean coming from an angle that allowed her to be easily open to discussion. She would have to know nearly everything about the little girl so as not to trample upon special memories.

That was another task to be overcome with the Baron. Opening up about his sister would almost mean sharing his own experiences too. The Baron was a hard man and one who would surely detest letting anyone know about his past and personal life.

Satisfied, Isabel returned to her new room and dismissed the maid. The stress and ache of riding a horse had finally dawned on her, and

she hurried to rest her aching body. There was much to do later, best to get as much rest as she could.

To Isabel, the dinner prepared was quite elaborate for two people. Sitting at opposite ends of each other, William and Isabel ate their meal. The dining hall was large and quiet, but lavishly decorated. At adjacent corners of the hall were flowerpots; one was filled with daffodils while the other contained a rose plant.

No doubt, the servants took great care in making sure the plants had all the nutrients they needed. There were paintings on the wall. Paintings of battlefields and saints peering down from heaven to grant the soldiers aid.

The paintings looked old and unattended to. Obviously, they were of little interest to the unscrupulous Lord. No one would expect the man that refused to go to church and frequented taverns to take care of such beautiful art.

“How are you enjoying your meal?” William asked.

Isabel had not expected his question. It was probably because she was paying more attention to the paintings than the food.

“The meal tastes nice. Thank you,” Isabel replied, not once taking her eyes off the paintings.

However, the Baron was not done yet.

“You know, those paintings were commissioned nearly two decades ago. They tell the tale of Alfred the Great. Having to battle the Viking army on numerous occasions, he is said to be the first king to defend his kingdom against their army successfully. This feat was said to have only been through the power of the saints who interceded on his behalf. Thus he later went on to become the first true king of England,” William explained.

Isabel simply hummed, making him feel uneasy about his lengthy explanation.

“At least that’s what the records say,” he added at the end.

Dinner went on without any further interruption. William understood that she was not in the mood for small talk. However, he was still in his house, and he would have to introduce her to his sister eventually. Then she would have to talk.

Done with her meal, Isabel thanked her host and excused herself to take a closer look at the paintings. Soon after, the Baron joined her, and together, they watched on in silence. Each person with a separate thought from the other.

The Baron, farther off from the painting than Isabel, admired the lady rather than the paintings. He soon discovered that not only did she spike his interest, but she also troubled his mind. For he constantly battled within himself whether to treat her as he would any outsider or to treat her fairly as his heart wanted.

Nevertheless, the time to decide would come, but for now, they had more pressing matters that needed their attention.

“Come My Lady! It is time to meet my sister, Beatrice,” William ordered and began walking away towards the stairs.

“Wait!” Isabel called back, “I have questions that need answering. It is about your sister. How did she get to be this way? Was she born with this illness, or did something happen to her while she was young to make her so?”

At the last question, the Baron closed his eyes, deep in thought. Isabel waited for what seemed to be hours, and for a moment, she thought

the Baron had fallen asleep.

“I am sorry, but that question, I cannot answer,” William replied.

Isabel was taken aback by his statement. Although she had suspected that the Baron might not answer all her personal questions, however, was it unnecessary for her to learn of his sister’s past?

“But you promised to answer any question I asked. Why then do you withhold information I need to familiarise myself with your sister?” Isabel queried.

William knew that what Isabel had said was right. However, he was determined not to say anymore concerning the matter. There were some things even Isabel must never know about.

“You will simply have to find another way to befriend my sister. Otherwise, you foul our agreement, and it will be known that your word has no value,” William replied and continued his walk up the stairs.

Isabel was now certain that whatever had caused his sister’s illness was greatly related to the Baron. There was a great chance that finding out the details of her illness would unlock a certain past or memory the Baron wanted no one to discover.

Nevertheless, the contiguous task was to follow the Baron for the introduction. After that, she would begin her search for answers.

They walked quietly up until the second floor. There was a short pause before William gently knocked on the door three times. After receiving no response, he tried again, and when that failed, he was convinced she was probably asleep.

“It seems my sister is asleep. Do not worry; tomorrow we shall try

again. Maybe, then she will be feeling better and ready to accept visitors," William stated and began heading for his room.

Isabel stood there for quite a while after, wondering what the little Beatrice looked like and how she would gain her confidence. She also noticed that the Baron had neglected to wish her a good night. Nevertheless, the next day already had its activities labelled out.

Her topmost priority would be to gain the confidence of the young girl. Every other thing would come after that. Walking back to her bedchambers, she thought of her brother and Aunt Mariam. And just before she closed her eyes to sleep, the image of her parents smiling down on her passed through her mind.

All the while William and Isabel had been together none had noticed the lone figure hiding within the shadows, watching them with angry eyes.

Chapter 7

Morning came, and Isabel was already on her feet. She had laid out threads and needles, as well as a few pieces of cloth. At breakfast, she noticed the Baron was absent, and when she confronted the housekeeper, she was told he had an early morning engagement that could not wait.

Disappointed and a bit relieved, she ate her meal in silence and returned to her bedchambers. When she thought the time was right, she left her room to seek out the young lady of the house. She knocked thrice, just as Lord William had done the previous night.

There was a long pause, and Isabel wondered if the knock had not been loud enough or the young Beatrice was asleep yet again. There was only one way to know; she was going to try again.

“Come in,” came a small, shrill voice from behind the door, just as she raised her hand to hit it.

Isabel took a deep breath. She was not sure why she felt so nervous. Maybe, it stemmed from the fact that she had not seen the figure behind the door, nor had she heard anything of relevance about her, save her illness.

Pushing the door open, Isabel noticed that it was quite lighter than all the other doors she had seen or touched. The room was nearly covered in total darkness, and it seemed to reach on to no end. It was no wonder the lady felt the way she did. Anyone living in that sort of dark environment was bound to be drawn away from people.

The bedframe was the first thing she noticed once she came in. It was at the centre-left corner of the room, directly facing the windows. The windows were covered with heavy drapes that blocked all light coming from the outside.

The only source of illumination was a dying candle that rested on the drawer closest to her bed. Beside her bed was a large shelf, filled with books and drawings. A book, open at the centre, lay on the girl's lap. She covered herself with her sheets and only wore her night cloth.

Gradually, Isabel appraised the little girl until their eyes met straight on. Realising her rudeness, she apologised quickly,

"I am sorry for staring, but how did you know it was I at the door and not someone else?"

Beatrice gave a knowing smile,

"William came to me earlier this morning and said you would be coming. And also, you knocked the same way only he does. Three taps."

Isabel was astonished. She had not been aware that the style she copied was actually a secret knock. She looked at Beatrice once again. She looked very much like her brother, but only in facial resemblance. In every other way, she was different from him entirely.

Her hair was jet black, just like her brother's. They had similar skin colour, but hers had become lighter due to the lack of sunlight. In other aspects, her face was oval, and she had almond-shaped eyes. She looked small and frail, in sharp contrast to William's large and intimidating size.

Regardless, she was beautiful.

"Okay. I am sorry for interrupting, but I was wondering if you could use some company?" Isabel asked.

Without waiting for a response, she went for the huge curtains and

slid them partially open. Beatrice shrieked at first but did not complain. Rather she enveloped herself in her bedsheets. Finally illuminated, Isabel could see the room fully for the first time.

The room was large and accommodated two large shelves and wardrobes. The wardrobe was somewhat far from the bed region. The first shelf contained the books and drawings Isabel had first spotted close to the bedframe. The other was further into the room. They were filled with paintings, vases, and other objects, which probably held emotional or financial value.

Some of the paintings were of their family. One contained a man, a woman, and a young boy. Another contained the same set of people but in a different setting. The woman in the previous painting was now lying down on a bed, with a little babe wrapped within her arms. The man and the boy were standing by her at opposite sides of the bed. That baby must have been Beatrice when she was born.

“Your family looks beautiful,” Isabel commented as she held the painting in her hands.

However, she received no response. Beatrice was still tucked underneath the covers. Going from one shelf to the other, Isabel checked the paintings and noticed one distinct fact; out of all the family pictures, there was only one with Beatrice in them.

Suddenly it dawned on her; Beatrice had not spent a long time with her parents. It could only mean that something had happened to them both when she was young. Could that be the source of her nervous disposition?

“Mother died giving birth to me, and after that nothing was ever right with our family,” Beatrice explained, “I believe that’s what you were wondering after seeing those paintings.”

Isabel was surprised she had guessed her thoughts. She was still cooped up under the sheets.

“I am sorry,” Isabel said remorsefully.

She allowed a long pause before asking her the other question that had popped into her head.

“How long did it take before your symptoms started?” Isabel asked, referring to her illness.

“About three years,” came the reply. “At first, the doctors believed it was the flu. However, when it persisted for months, they knew it was something else. I was told that after four years, the medication started working, and I got better.”

Isabel really felt sorry for her. Having to endure all those many doctors and medications must have been anguish for her. Only God knew all the pains she had had to face alone and without a mother to comfort her. Thinking about it alone seemed like torture.

There was a long pause before any of them made a move. Beatrice got out of the covers, and Isabel found it relieving that the girl was not in tears.

Encouraged, she took out another picture. It was hidden behind a stack of junk and covered in dust. It only contained Beatrice and her older brother. They were both dressed in fine clothing. Isabel admired the two siblings. William was probably around his early twenties while Beatrice looked like she was ten.

“What about this one? You look beautiful here. Moreover, this is the only time I have ever seen your brother smile. Where was this?” she asked.

“At a ball. I was twelve, and he was about twenty,” Beatrice answered without looking at the painting.

Isabel was beaming with smiles. This was the only painting she had seen where William was an adult. His face was still devoid of the scar, and he looked handsome and elegant. Having seen some of the paintings, Isabel was convinced their family was extremely wealthy.

Not every nobleman could afford to have so many portraits painted, let alone by artists of such quality and talent. She grazed her hand over the painting to feel the texture, stopping at William's smiling lips.

He was not so bad after all. He looked innocent and charming. Not the vile and cruel man people now knew him to be.

"That was the last time I saw my brother smile," Beatrice said, breaking her fantasies.

"Why? What happened?" Isabel enquired.

Beatrice made a motion as if to speak and then stopped. She closed her eyes, and her countenance changed.

"I do not want to talk about it. Can we do something else?" she asked.

It was obvious that something had happened that day. Possibly something that had changed the lives of both siblings ever since. Isabel knew that further questions about the matter might only infuriate the young Beatrice and push them further apart.

Whatever the case, it was best to stop there as the younger lady requested, at least for the time being. She dropped the painting and went to sit beside Beatrice on the bed.

"Yes. Maybe we could talk about it some other time," Isabel replied. "So what do you do in your free time?"

The question seemed funny, but she did all she could to suppress her laughter. Beatrice was usually confined in her bedchambers, so when was she not free?

“I love drawing. However, when I am unable to draw I learn embroidering. I also read poems and poetry,” Beatrice answered pointing to the shelf of books.

Isabel then excused herself and retreated to her room. She brought back the materials she had laid aside earlier in the morning, and together they began knitting.

Isabel spent the rest of the day indoors with Beatrice, occasionally taking breaks. She had both their meals served in the room during lunch, and they talked about nothing in particular.

She got to know she was older than Beatrice by merely two years. They were distant relatives to a previous king, which explained their immense wealth. Their estate extended far into the forests, and her mother was responsible for most of the flowers that grew around.

Isabel studied Beatrice and wondered how this young and beautiful lady could be related to the outlandish Baron. Their attitudes were opposites, and had it not been for the paintings, she would still have had her doubts about their births.

The rest of the day sped swiftly and without much activity. As the sun drew closer to its setting, Isabel excused herself and took her leave. Her encounter with Beatrice had been slightly awkward but enlightening. She had gained a bit more knowledge about their family and most importantly, about the Baron.

There was only one more thing that still bothered her. Whatever had happened on the day of that last painting must be the answer to the Baron’s unruly character and vile disposition. If only she could get

more information from someone who knew all the details, then she could understand him better.

It was also possible she could then find the key to fully changing Beatrice's mood and countenance. It all went back to what happened that day. All the answers she needed, compressed in a single image. An image with a key.

The sooner she could solve the mystery surrounding the Gregory family, the sooner she could fulfil her end of the bargain and return to her brother and Aunt Mariam. However, the thought of returning home was not as intriguing as the thought of solving the secrets of the Gregory family.

In the end, Isabel worked herself into having a headache and had to retire early to bed. Her mission for the day had been accomplished. Another day, another plan.

Chapter 8

The next day, Isabel spent most of her time cooped up with Beatrice, embroidering. She taught Beatrice some of the patterns her mother had shown to her, and Beatrice, in turn, showed Isabel some of her very own patterns. Although they were quite basic, Isabel found a unique style and creativity in the methods Beatrice had created.

After a lengthy period of sharing ideas, Isabel decided to take a break. Even though it had been just three days since Isabel arrived at the Gregory mansion, she was already making headway with Beatrice.

They no longer had awkward silences between them. Isabel told stories of her life before her parents' deaths. It turned out that Beatrice had never been out of the country. Isabel gave her details of her travels with her parents to faraway places and her free time with some of her friends.

They laughed and joked now as they sewed, and Isabel began to wonder if this was how she would have felt if she had had a younger sister. The thought both amused and inspired her to share more details with Beatrice.

As she left the room, she made a mental note to tell Beatrice of some of her experiences and skills such as swimming, horse riding, tree climbing, and chess. She wondered how it would feel if they switched places and it was she who had missed out on her entire childhood.

When she got to her room, she tried going to sleep, but her mind was still active, and her body full of energy. Peeping through the window, Isabel found the sun was still up and the weather warm. It was a good day to be outdoors.

Quickly, she changed into an outdoor dress and hurried down the stairs. At the bottom, she met the housekeeper, Rachael, doing some house cleaning.

“Are you going somewhere, My Lady?” Rachael asked.

“Yes. I would like to visit the stables and check out the horses. After that, I would like to take a stroll across the yard, acquaint myself with the estate. I think I might need someone to show me around. It would speak ill of me to get lost on my first day outside,” Isabel answered.

“May I join you? I could be of assistance in showing you some of the most lovely spots around,” Rachael offered, flashing Isabel an innocent smile.

Out of nowhere, William cut in just before Isabel could give her reply. “That will not be necessary, Rachael; you may continue with your chores. I will accompany the Lady in her sightseeing. It is of course my property, who is better to show it off than my humble self?”

Isabel was surprised by his offer. But she knew she could not accept it.

“I am sorry, My Lord, but I believe it would not seem proper for an unwed couple to be seen alone and together in public.”

“Ah! Do not worry about that. We are yet to become a couple, My Lady, and in any case, there are numerous servants working about and tending to the estate. Surely, no one would consider us alone in such a situation. Rest easy My Lady, your honour remains intact. You are safe with me,” William replied and smirked.

Isabel knew her face was red with embarrassment, but she made little of it. Since he so insisted, she decided to indulge him. She wondered how many ladies he had used that line on. Straightening her face, she scoffed and turned away, heading for the exit and leaving the Baron to trail after her.

The stables turned out to be larger and fuller than Isabel had

imagined. There were horses of different breeds, stallions, and thoroughbreds. Moving from one stall to another, she touched and admired them all. She promised herself to take some of them out for a ride once the chance presented itself.

It was now time to explore the estate. As promised, Isabel insisted on a chance to see the flowers by the pathways leading to the mansion. William had no choice than to oblige. Therefore, they began their walk along the pathway heading in the direction of the town. William explained the history of the estate. How one of his ancestors had conquered a town bereft with internal violence in the name of the King. After which the King had then decided to reward them with a large portion of its land.

While the Baron explained his heritage, Isabel admired the scented plants, feeling their petals and tasting the nectar. She would occasionally give William a nod or a hum as he progressed with his story.

Gradually they neared the end of the wonderful field, and Isabel could see the outline of the town and children playing around in the open space. She had always fancied the idea of having a child of her own. Probably a little babe, wrapped in her arms or lying in its cradle. The thought came to her once again, and she could not stop the smile from spreading to her face.

“So what is so fascinating about the flowers that causes you to smile so much?” William asked, suddenly bringing her out of her reverie.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I only happened to remember a fond memory I had when I was still a child. While I was still young and followed my mother to various events, she would sometimes buy me a doll. I later grew up cherishing these dolls, and whenever I felt lonely, I would hold onto them tightly,” Isabel replied.

There was a moment of silence between them, and as the evening breeze blew, the scent of flowers wafted into her nostrils. She looked at the Baron and for the first time, saw him differently.

The wind blew his hair about, and he looked remarkably handsome, similar to his youthful look in the painting. She had not noticed it before, but his hair was trimmed, and his beard was shaved.

Isabel found herself wondering what would have happened if she had met the Baron under different circumstances. Maybe she would not need to be on her guard whenever she was around him.

Without realizing it, she had been staring at William for a while and only managed to catch herself before he noticed.

“Are you feeling well?” William asked, noticing her bowed head and flushed cheeks.

“Oh yes!” Isabel croaked.

She cleared her throat and began walking down the path towards the mansion. William took the initiative and hurried to take the lead. They kept walking down the path, and just when she thought they were heading for the mansion, William kept heading straight.

“Are we not going back inside? Where does this path lead?” she asked.

William smiled cunningly and kept walking. Isabel gave an exasperated sigh and tagged along. Although they were still in public, Isabel was aware they were increasing the distance between them and the servants. Twice, she had to check to see there were still a few people within sight.

“Where are we heading to? We need to be getting back indoors,” Isabel complained.

However, just as she complained, she realised the Baron had never

invited her nor had he actually led in the direction they were headed. He had simply taken the lead, and she had followed.

Isabel cursed herself for being so gullible. How could she have followed him this far away from public eyes? Of course he would try to take advantage of her. He was basically taking her far enough where he could have his way with her.

Even as Isabel contemplated on various possibilities, she never once considered stopping and returning to the mansion alone. Her instincts told her to keep moving, and her body complied.

Her curiosity took advantage of the looming danger and infinite possibilities. She wanted to find out for herself; she wanted to know. What laid waiting for her once he stopped and she caught up with him? Would he place his lips over hers in a passionate kiss? Would she allow herself to be taken right there in the cover of trees and bushes?

Once again, the Baron snapped her out of her rampaging thoughts.

“We are here,” he whispered.

He had his sights on the deep valley directly before them, and Isabel was once again urged by her instincts to look. She covered the distance between them and followed his gaze.

The valley looked incredibly deep. However, it was not the depth of the valley that caught Isabel’s attention, but what lay below. From below their feet till as far as the eyes could see, Isabel could not find a patch of soil. The entire area was covered in beautiful flowers that shone in the setting sun.

Enchanted by the sight before her, Isabel knew this was the most beautiful scene she had ever seen and might ever see for the rest of her life. Instinctively, she wiped the tear that had fallen to her cheeks.

Using her handkerchief, she wiped her eyes clear and sniffed. By the time she looked at William, he was staring at her with a satisfied smile on his face. He had probably planned to bring her, confident that it would loosen her up. And he was right. The sight had cleared her mind.

Isabel returned an appreciative smile. It was the least she could do without actually saying the words.

However, the Baron was yet to be finished with his surprises.

“One more place. There is something I need to show you, and you absolutely must see,” he coerced.

Isabel found herself willing to explore. Trusting the Baron seemed easier than she had thought, and obviously more rewarding and satisfying. What more did he have to show her? What else could be better than a valley of such beauty and splendour?

They walked on towards the mansion, and Isabel was disappointed to be returning just when she had hoped for more adventure. As though he had read her mind, William took a sharp turn and led her to an adjacent building, completely obstructed from view.

Having been to see the ‘scented valley’, as she called it, Isabel was no longer scared of being alone with the Baron. Rather, she concerned herself with the sights that lay expectantly before her.

“Where are we going this time?” Isabel asked excitedly.

“Do not worry; we are almost there,” William replied.

Pushing the heavy door open, William went in, and Isabel followed. She gasped as she found herself in a large and spacious hall with

sculptures and paintings at every corner. One particular painting caught her eyes.

It was a mural painting of a man at a table surrounded by eleven other men and a woman to his right.

Isabel opened her eyes wide with shock as recognition finally dawned on her.

“Is this…” she started, unable to complete the words.

Suddenly aware that Isabel had left his side, William walked back to where she stood.

“Yes. By Leonardo da Vinci in the late fifteenth century in the refectory of the Covent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, The Last Supper.”

Isabel gasped at the confirmation. This was one of the most famous and valued paintings in the world, and he had it sitting here, available for any thief to steal. How did such a man as he possess such a monumental item, valued by both the Church and artisans?

“But that is of no interest to me right now. What I had in mind to show you is right over here,” William said, steering Isabel in his direction.

He led her towards the eastern corner where a large bronze sculpture of his favourite horse stood in grandeur. The statue looked more of gold than bronze. Reaching a height Isabel guessed to be almost twice of hers, the stallion was not just beautiful, but elegant.

Suddenly, she felt a slightly warm breath graze the skin at the back of her neck. Startled, she realised the Baron was out of sight. Then it dawned on her that he was probably behind her, and she had just felt his breathing on her skin.

Scared and fascinated at the same time, she refused to confront him. Thoughts kept crossing her mind; what was he doing behind her? Was this the moment she had dreaded for so long? Perplexed, Isabel closed her eyes, waiting for answers or her fate.

Chapter 9

Standing behind her in the lighted great hall, the Baron was yet to touch her. At various ends of the hall were lighted torches, but the cast of the moonlight on the stallion sculpture gave a more spectacular view.

Isabel had only felt the stray warmth of his breath and a faint whiff of his scent, but yet she longed for something more. She yearned to understand her feelings, to quell the fluttering beats of her inexperienced heart.

Unsure what next to do, she waited for his next move; her ears sharp and her hairs sensitive, anticipating and predicting his moment of onslaught. Her breathing had changed. It now came in slow and heavy gasps.

All these were new to her. The lust, the want, the exciting feeling of being too close to the edge, of abandoning all her morals and simply going as the moment dictated. Involuntarily, Isabel held a hand to her chest as if to calm its rampage. She needed to think, needed to move, needed to say something or be thought a fool.

Suddenly, she caught herself. The image of her mother, faint but undeniably on time drifted right through her thoughts, causing a break in her chain of thoughts. How long had she stood there holding her chest and waiting for her honour to be taken? How possible was it that she had fallen for the words and charm of the unscrupulous Baron?

Surely, she should not think she was any different from the other women he had bedded. His reputation spoke all the volumes she needed to know. Her weariness and the smell of scented flowers must have done something to alter her thinking.

Why had the Baron brought her there? Could it not be that this had

been his intention all along? Best to stop now while she still had most of her dignity intact.

With renewed conviction, Isabel turned to challenge the Baron. She had yet to lose. If only she could show that she was unaffected by his charm and wits, then she could leave with her pride at least.

She held her head high and set her chin straight in defiance. Her eyes burned with passion and determination. She was going to prove to him that she was not like the ladies he had previously encountered. She was not going to fall easily for his tricks and lie with him.

And just as the last thought crossed her mind, it got replaced by the image of she and the Baron lying in bed together and her heart skipped a beat. Immediately, she knew she had lost.

William was smiling down at her with confidence and satisfaction. He had seen through her weak attempt at rejection and defiance, and now he knew that she had wanted him. Even if just for a moment, she had actually wanted him, and he had seen through it all.

Knowing, he began trailing his hands on her bare arm, and Isabel watched on, unable to distract herself from the feel of his hands on her skin.

This was what she had wanted, a feeling. His hands were barely grazing her skin and yet she felt this powerful tingling sensation deep within her, making her crave more of his touch. She wanted more.

His hands were travelling up her arm now, and she could feel the heat building up at every cell he touched. Isabel knew that unless she did something soon, she would yield to the overpowering yearning and lust boiling within her.

Her body was a wrestling ground between her brain telling her to stop and her lusting heart. Within her, Isabel struggled for control. How

could the Baron reach under her skin in so short a time?

Realising that immediate action was needed, she quietly withdrew. Although she had stopped the fight in her head, her skin missed the warmth of his fingertips and her heart, beating rapidly, craved attention.

Suddenly, they were interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps; it was the housekeeper. She had come to escort Isabel to bed. She wore her work clothes, and even as she stood there in their midst waiting for a reply, Isabel found her good looking. Her clothes hung loosely on her large bosom, and at the same time clung to her hips, giving anyone interested in looking a worthy sight and still managing to look elegant while at it.

For a brief moment, Isabel believed she caught the Baron scrutinizing the housekeeper's breasts, and that broke the enchanted feeling she had believed existed between them. In the end, he was same man she had heard him to be. How foolish of her to have thought otherwise.

Taking Rachael's offer, Isabel began her retreat to her room without giving the Baron any notice or a courtesy greeting. The day was already far spent, and the sound of trees and crickets filled the night air.

Fireflies added a special lighting to that of the touch in Rachael's hand. The night was calm, and the air was cool against Isabel's warm skin. It helped to soothe the burning sensation she had felt with the Baron.

However, now away from his presence, Isabel felt a certain loss at being away from him. Although her head told her to believe what her eyes had seen, she refused to dismiss the idea that he had fantasised about the housekeeper while still in her presence.

She knew it was too early to make her judgement on him, yet she could not stop imagining the possibility that the Baron was someone

else, someone different from what all the stories said. She found it difficult to dissuade the notion that the Baron was actually just like the painting she had seen in Beatrice's room; charming, intelligent, and sweet.

But he had built up such a solid reputation that thinking otherwise would seem like a mere fantasy rather than reality, and for the first time, Isabel found herself conflicted over a man. Lying on her bed once again, Isabel recapped the events of the previous day.

It seemed like it had been a long time since she had arrived at the Baron's mansion, and yet she longed to stay even more. There were more things to discover, and having only an idea did little to stop the excitement that welled within her.

The next few days passed quickly. Hours turned into days and days into weeks. Isabel spent the better part of each day reading and embroidering with Beatrice. After her last encounter with the Baron, she had avoided being alone with him. This had caused her to spend most of her time with his sister and the rest of the day cooped up in bedchambers or loitering about the mansion, familiarising herself with the maids and servants.

On one of such wanderings, Isabel met a young girl who also worked in the mansion, precisely, the gardener. At first, Isabel had needed directions to a certain room, but everything escalated, and they ended up having a lengthy conversation.

Isabel found this as the perfect opportunity to gather some information about her hosts. She was sure the girl was bound to know something about her masters, and Isabel intended to exploit every chance she got.

In exchange, she promised her some clothes and enchanting stories from her numerous travels. The girl's name was Evelyn. She had worked for the Gregory family right from when she was a little girl. She was nearing fifteen years, two years younger than Beatrice.

Her father was the head gardener, and he was majorly responsible for the tending of the flowers that graced the huge estate, though he sometimes never did some jobs. At first, Isabel had only asked random questions about her upbringing, then she had moved to her employers, how they treated her, and how much she loved it there.

Isabel found out that the girl was immensely grateful to the Gregory family as all their workers earned far more than those of other houses, and this gained them some respect among people of similar status. She also learned that the Baron had once been nice and kind to everyone.

He would buy gifts and clothing for any of his servants celebrating a special occasion like a birthday or marriage or even childbirth. He smiled often and laughed a lot, and he always treated the servants fairly. Now, he was still patient, fair, and just, but a far figure from his former self.

When Isabel questioned the timing of this sudden and erratic change, she had little answers to give. There had been a holiday given to all the servants. However, when they had all returned, their Lord was nursing a scar, and his entire personality had changed. So also had that of the lady Beatrice, save her face.

Isabel had asked some more direct questions, but the servant girl had exhausted her memory and said all she knew. Isabel then told her tales of her youthful adventures with her parents, much to the girl's delight.

In the end, the girl had left with just two pieces of clothing that would suit her without looking stolen. Isabel began to ruminate on the newly gathered information. Unknown to the servant girl, she had just confirmed one of Isabel's hypothesis: William and his sister had both been affected by the same event.

That helped to simplify the questions in her head. The puzzle now looked feasible. She was certain that all she needed was to find out what had happened on the day of the ball, and all the pieces would fit

right together. She would be able to understand the circumstances of Beatrice's strange illness and if possible, why her brother had taken the path of anger and scorn.

Once that was out of the way, Isabel was sure she would be only a step away from being free to return to her family. However, the thought of leaving was yet to spike as much enthusiasm as discovering the missing puzzle pieces.

Isabel had some questions she needed to ask the Baron once she was able to get him alone with her.

However, things changed for Isabel the next day. As usual, she was with Beatrice embroidering when they heard a knock on the door. Isabel had a letter from her brother informing her of his impending visit in a few days.

"What does it say?" Beatrice asked.

"My brother George says he will be visiting before the end of the week," Isabel replied, folding the letter. "I can only think of one reason why my brother would want to check up on me, and that is my Aunt Mariam."

"I doubt that. Your brother might also miss you and want to see you again after so long."

Isabel considered her words. Yes, it was true George had changed after the incident with the Baron, but she wondered by how much. Without giving her reply, she unconsciously continued her embroidery while deep in thought.

Having spent most of her cheerful days with Isabel, Beatrice was aware that something troubled her heart.

“Your stitches won’t last if you keep sewing them that way,” Beatrice advised raising her voice.

Isabel was stunned back to the present. She was beginning to develop the habit of drifting off to places in her imagination whenever she was troubled.

“I’m sorry; what did you say?” Isabel asked.

“I said, your stitches won’t last if you keep sewing them in that manner. You were stabbing the poor pillow,” Beatrice replied.

“Oh!” was all Isabel could say.

Her mind was occupied by different thoughts, and her embroidering was unfortunately not one of them.

“So tell me, what bothers you so? I have seen you many times, and not once have you ever stopped smiling. It sometimes irritated me to see you smiling all the time. Some other times, I found it comforting. So tell me, what bothers you?”

At first, Isabel was about to answer, but she found this to be an excellent opportunity to get some information out of Beatrice. Maybe she could use this as a chance to finally discover the missing piece.

“Okay, I will tell you. However, only if you agree to answer some of my questions too.”

Beatrice thought for a while. Getting Isabel to reveal the source of her discomfort might lead to her answering some questions she would rather not think of. However, if Isabel’s mood persisted, they would both end up having a sour day.

“I accept. We will both have two chances to answer three questions. If you feel uncomfortable with the first question, you can choose not to answer it. However, you will have to answer the next question. Do you also agree to this? It will be like a game between us,” Beatrice said and waited expectantly for Isabel’s reply.

“Yes I accept.”

Good. This would be a great chance to ask the question that had been bothering her for so long. Even if Beatrice should refuse the first question, she would have no choice than to answer her next question. Then, finally, she would understand the mystery behind the Gregory family.

“So who goes first?” Isabel asked.

“I will go first,” Beatrice offered.

Isabel left her chair to sit beside her friend. What question could be so hard that she would not be able to answer? It was obvious that the first question would be an easy question so that if she refused the second one, there would be another waiting in line. That meant three questions, two answers.

“What happened between you and your brother that makes you think ill of him?

Isabel was taken aback by the question. It was fairly easy to answer, but also tricky. Nothing came to mind. She was sure there was nothing between her and her brother, but then she realised that was not the answer Beatrice was looking for. So she started at the very beginning.

Chapter 10

“My parents had only been married for four years when they had my brother, George. My father had wanted a boy while my mother had wanted a girl. However, they were both very happy and pleased with him and employed the best scholars around to tutor him. Two years after he was born, I came along. Both my parents were satisfied and loved us both genuinely.” Isabel paused to make sure Beatrice was following.

“Years later, we began showing skills in different areas of interest; I loved the outside, the field and outdoor activities, but my brother loved art, music, and poetry. My father was a bit disappointed. He wanted a son who had interests in fighting and all the other things that made up a great soldier and ruler. He was afraid that something might happen and my brother would not be able to defend the honour of the family,” Isabel explained.

“And he was right?” Beatrice asked.

Even though Beatrice had asked another question, Isabel let it slide as it was still part of the original one.

“In a way,” Isabel corrected. “Father wanted to influence my brother into becoming his ideal son, so he spent more time with him than he did with me and my mother.”

Isabel now realised why her mother took her along on her journeys. It was either because she was lonely, or the men needed the estate to themselves for a while. As shocking as it sounded, Isabel had not realised the simple truth within her own past. She had always thought her family was perfect, but now that she was relating her past to someone else, she began to find loopholes in her otherwise happy life.

“Did it work? George. Did your father’s methods work?” Beatrice asked obviously intrigued by the story.

“Yes, it did. However, everything changed when my parents died a few months ago.”

“How?”

This was definitely more than three questions.

“After the news of my parents’ death got to us, my brother started keeping late nights. Sometimes he would not come back until the next day. It appeared he and my father had gotten extremely close, and his death shook him even more than it did me,” Isabel replied.

Even as she said the words, she felt sorry for her brother. He had loved their parents, and their sudden loss had somehow triggered an unexpected trait in him, which had made him seek solace in his friends and ale.

If only she had been there for her brother when he needed her the most, he would not have had to depend on his friends and gamble the house away. She had also neglected his feelings when he had told her of their predicament.

Losing the property must have caused him more anguish than it did her because then, their father’s fears had been fulfilled.

Isabel closed her eyes and let the tears trail down her cheeks. She had been insensitive to her brother, and she needed to apologise. She could only imagine the feeling he must have had after being the person he had trained hard not to be. In addition, she had slapped him. She was indeed an awful person.

How could she ever forgive herself? She had not been the only one affected by grief, yet she had ignored his feelings and treated him with scorn and contempt.

Suddenly, her eyes widened with shock as she realised another truth. She had acted the same way with the Baron. Having come to the mansion to seek back their properties, she had not bothered giving him the benefit of the doubt but had judged him according to what she had heard. She had even offered her body to him in recompense. Oh, how foolish he must have thought her to be.

As Isabel drowned herself in self-pity, Beatrice continued with her embroidering. Only she seemed to notice when William gave a knock and then entered. She gave her brother a quiet look and returned to her work.

William sensing the tension in the air, decided to wait it out. He grabbed the chair closest to him and sat, watching Isabel.

Beatrice stole one or two glances at him to confirm her thoughts. Then she went back to her sewing. Isabel sat there with her head bowed and her eyes wet. It was not until her tears started falling to her dress, did the Baron notice them and hand her his handkerchief.

She looked up slowly in recognition and gratefully accepted the handkerchief. It was just as though he had been sent from the heavens. He was there to offer his aid right when she needed it.

Isabel wiped her tears and blew her nose. She laughed a little after that. She was a mess, and she did not mind. Neither did he. He still had a smile on his face, just like in the painting.

She turned to Beatrice and found her completely engrossed in her sewing, no doubt using it as an escape to avoid being questioned. Nevertheless, her turn would wait. Turning back to the Baron, there had to be a reason why he was here.

“What business do you have in the ladies’ room, Lord William?” Isabel asked.

William smiled wider at the mention of his name. It was one of the few occasions she had actually called him by his first name.

“Your brother, My Lady. He will be arriving tonight. I just felt to inform you.”

“But I received his letter this morning. He said in a few days,” Isabel queried.

“Yes, he did say he was going to apologise for that. He said something was compelling him to arrive tonight. He made mention of an Aunt Marie.”

Ah! She should have known better. Of course, it would be Aunt Mariam. Only he and God knew how long he had had to withstand her pestering. Living alone with Aunt Mariam could sometimes be lovely and enjoyable, and at the same time, it could be terrible and hellish.

However, she would have to prepare to meet him. Then a thought crossed her head, “Did he say who else was coming along with him?” she asked in alarm.

“It appears he will be coming alone,” William replied. “Eh, who is this Aunt Marie? Is she a close relative? Maybe we could invite her along.”

“No! Absolutely not. She isn’t a bad person, but at the same time, I believe it is too soon for her to be visiting. Besides, who would look after the estate with both my brother and aunt gone? Everything would be in shambles by the time they return. Best for Aunt Mariam to stay back, for now,” Isabel surmised.

Unable to counter her argument, William dropped the idea. He left soon after to order the servants on the meals to prepare. There was another vacant room prepared for emergencies like this. George would

rest there, should he decide to spend the night.

And so, the day went by without Isabel asking the question that had boggled her mind for so long. She had dedicated that day to mending the bonds she had. Questioning could come another time. Besides, there was still much time to find out the truth about the Gregory family.

Her curiosity could wait a few more days or weeks. She was not going to rush things anymore. She had all the time in the world.

Chapter 11

George Montgomery had woken up with joy in his heart. The joy of seeing his sister. It had been so many weeks now since he last set his eyes on her. Initially, he had worried about her state of emotions and general condition in the Baron's house, knowing full well the kind of person the Baron was. If he could, he would have definitely prevented her from going. However, when he remembered her reason for embarking on such a dangerous journey, he felt helpless.

One thing was certain; he was loved by his sister. He had to be, for her to have taken up such a task. He knew she had done it more for the sake of their property and inheritance. However, he was sure that beyond that, love for him had also pushed her to embark on such a dangerous journey, taking the path of obscurity.

The personality of the Baron was well known. George himself had seen him act cruelly towards people. He had seen him deface a knight who challenged him in a duel before. He had had personal encounters with him. There were several hitherto impressions in his mind regarding the Baron, unpleasant impressions, and he knew what a great and life-threatening risk his beloved sister had taken.

He was not overstating his fears, no not at all. And that was why he understood Aunt Mariam's fears. He was concerned that Isabel would return, broken, battered.

He could not help considering how things might have ended up horribly if Isabel had insisted that he bore the consequences of his recklessness alone; if she had made sure that he got back the documents of their property, himself. How would he have achieved that feat?

Impossible. It was simply impossible! He was a man, lesser than his sister was. It had always been common knowledge in their household, even while their parents lived, that Isabel had been the man child his father had desperately sought.

It was the reason why his old man had required so much time with George and all but neglected his wife and daughter. Desperately wanting to shape George into the man they had wanted, hoped for him to be.

Yet, at the first chance he had gotten to be that man, he had fulfilled his father's fears. Even now, thinking of it sent a chill down his spine. Face the Baron? Oh… he had not the courage Isabel had. Not even half of it! He would have failed, no doubt. And woefully too!

Then he would have brought shame upon their family, and upon his father's grave. He would never have been able to forgive himself. Never. He wondered if his parents were aware of all that had happened; if they were turning in their graves.

Nevertheless, the deed had been done. All that was left to do was make sure that he righted his wrong. He was going to be a better man. By the Virgin, he swore he was.

Tears dropped, falling to the bed on which he sat. Staining the fine silk, rich with excellent embroidery. It had been one of his mother's best works because she had done it with love and passion. She had often said so, herself.

He would honour their memory, by God, he would. Quickly remembering himself, he dried his tears.

The irony of the situation did not elude him. Just now, he had vowed to honour their memory. Yet, here he was, crying as a babe. His father had never favoured seeing him cry. No, late Mr. Montgomery had believed that a man who shed tears was no man at all.

The first day he had seen George cry, he had made certain to give his son a scolding. It had been after dinner when George had thought all was well, nothing amiss. His father had called him to the privacy of

his chambers and had sounded his warning.

“The men are meant to protect the women and not cry like them,” he had said. “A man seen crying is considered a weakling and incapable of caring for and protecting his household. He would not be granted the honour of going to war to fight for his country and the people he loves. You would not want to be that man now, would you, son?”

His meaning had been clear, and George had understood. From that day hence, he had kept his tears private. Just like now. To never cry again… that was as impossible as a man flying.

Looking out the window, he took a feel of the weather. The sun seemed to have gone behind the clouds, and the air had grown a wee bit chilly. Evening tide would fall soon, and he would need to be on his way to the Baron’s abode.

In the meanwhile, there was time yet to put to good use. Rising from his bed to go to the study, he decided to do just that.

It was not long until the sun fell.

George tarried not. He dropped all that there was to be done, changed into attire more appropriate for his visit, saddled his horse, and was on his way to his dearest sister. He took one last look at Aunt Mariam, whom he knew would have loved more than anything to accompany him on this journey.

Fortunately, she had understood the importance of remaining in the estate to see to affairs. That was Aunt Mariam. While he could be unreasonable, and Isabel, hot-headed, Aunt Mari was often the voice of calm and reason. He patted the scarf she had knitted for Isabel, and with a kick to his horse’s side, began to gallop wildly down the village path.

He must have ridden for an hour or more, not that he took mind to

the time. He enjoyed the ride tremendously, enjoying the feel of the cool evening air as it caressed his skin. This was one of the reasons why he had chosen to go with a horse, rather than a carriage.

The other reason was that he wanted to appear to the judge, a simple man.

The sky had darkened considerably when the magnificent estate finally came into view. From afar, he admired its beauty. Isabel had spoken of it in the letters they have exchanged since her departure. Now, he could see that her words did not do it justice.

He slowed his horse down to a trot as he neared the gates, easily passing through when they opened for him. They closed the moment he was inside. He turned to nod at the men who manned the manor, then he picked up pace and rode the rest of the way to the house.

Surely, the Lord had informed his staff of his coming. Oddly, this calmed his nerves.

The moment he reached the main house, he dropped from his horse. There was a servant by his side the next minute, ready to take the stallion from him. George retrieved the scarf Aunt Mariam had sent Isabel, gave his horse a solid pat, and sent him off. As he turned, he found an elderly man waiting for him, impeccably dressed, for the matter.

He ought to be the butler, George thought. This thought was confirmed when the man bowed.

“Mr. Montgomery, it is my most delight to welcome you to Gregory Manor. The entire household has been anticipating your visit. I’m Luke Crawford, at your service, my good gentleman.”

Impressed by the butler’s manners, George smiled warmly and acknowledged his presence with a nod. Isabel had not mentioned any

butler in her letters. He wondered if Crawford was a new staff.

“If you would, allow me to lead you to the dining hall where my master and his house members await.”

“Thank you, Crawford. I very much appreciate that.”

With another bow, Crawford began leading the way. It happened that neither Gregory nor Isabel was waiting in the dining hall.

No, he met them just at the end of the hallway, standing side by side, like a man would welcome a guest into his home, with his wife. The Baron, surprisingly had a warm countenance, unlike the sternness George had anticipated. Hmmm…

His appraisal of the Baron was cut short as his sister abruptly shot out from her master’s side and began to run towards him. He opened his arms just in time to catch her and thanks to her small frame, managed to keep his footing solid on the ground.

They began to laugh, together, as if on cue, for absolutely no reason at all. Or perhaps, there was a reason. Perhaps, holding his sister in his arms once again was the cause of this joy. To see her healthy, whole, and like the Isabel he had always known.

His fears had been banished. She was fine. And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 12

Isabel had returned to her room after a very busy day. She had spent most of the day with Beatrice, knitting. They had also been able to embroider a very beautiful tablecloth, different hues of red, and blue. She had thought of what to do with the excellent piece, and a brilliant idea had come to mind.

The tablecloth that graced the table in her bedchamber had always seemed out of place. At least, now, she had something fitting.

Afterwards, she had left Beatrice's room, giving her time to rest. Upon returning to her own chambers, she had taken her sweet time to relax in the steaming bathwater. Then, she had begun to prepare for her brother's arrival.

She had been at the window, done dressing, when she had seen him coming afar off, his white stallion glistening in the rising moonlight. Of course, she had sent word to William, and William had promptly sent word to the men at the gates, to grant George easy entrance.

As soon as he had passed through those gates, she had gone down the steps to wait for him. To her surprise, William had already been there, impeccably dressed and seeming agreeable enough to welcome her brother.

The moment she had seen him, all else had fallen away. She had told herself to keep still, to behave, but oh… her legs had acted on their own. Completely!

Now, standing in his arms, she knew no regrets, only gladness. As soon as they recovered from their bout of laughter, they pulled away.

She took one good look at her brother, thanks to the gas lamps they had recently begun to use, in favour of the candlesticks. The colour

had fully returned to his face. His eyes swirled with alertness. And she knew that he had not taken to drinking again, in her absence.

Good.

“You look well, George. It is a delight to see you again, I swear it. I did not imagine I would be so glad. I suppose I have missed you even more dearly than I reckoned.”

His lips settled into a charming smile. Taking her hands, he stepped back and caused her to spin.

“And you look well, Isabel. Like you have been treated right.”

She observed as his gaze fluttered to William, and back to her. Of course, her brother would have feared for her well-being. Oh, she loved him so. He must have imagined the worst.

“Of course, I have been, Greg. It’s not terrible here, not at all. This manor seems to agree with me.” She turned around then and hooked her arm in his. She started to walk, leading him to William.

“It would appear that the people do too.” Her gaze met William’s for a fraction of a second before she looked away. Finally, they covered the distance that lay between them and came to stand in front of the Baron.

“My Lord, you have met my brother, George Montgomery. George, His Lordship, Lord William Gregory, Lord of Landcastle.”

She observed quietly as both men greeted each other. While William appeared relaxed, comfortable, a man in control, her brother seemed nervous.

Nevertheless, they managed to shake each other's hands and exchange pleasantries, civilly. She said a prayer up above for that.

"You have a very lovely home, Lord Gregory," George said.

"Thank you. It is all of my mother's work. All I have done is keep it and tend to it."

"Even that is great work that must be commended. You have done it wonderfully so."

Isabel's watched as an amused glint flickered across William's eyes. His lips curved up at the corners, but he simply said, "Thank you, Montgomery. You are welcome to my abode. Dinner awaits; I rather would have my food while the steam comes off, and I find myself famished and in urgent need of nourishment. Come, I shall lead the way."

They soon arrived at the dining hall to find the table set for four. The meal looked plentiful enough to feed a feast. There were assorted choices; mashed rice with curry, fish, roast, and vegetables The aroma filled the air, causing everyone to salivate.

As they settled down into the seats, they were all aware of one seat that lay empty. Beatrice's. Isabel had begged her to come, and she had said she would give it a thought.

Not wanting to push, Isabel had left it at that. Apparently, Beatrice had decided otherwise. Just then, the doors of the dining hall opened, and when she turned to see who it was, she knew she should not have concluded so soon.

There was Beatrice, as fair as an angel in her blue evening dress. She looked so lovely and not half as pale as she had been when Isabel had first met her. She made for such a wholesome sight, and it thrilled Isabel, that she had thought to honour her.

The gentlemen arose, and as they did, Beatrice walked further into the dining hall, until she came to a stop at the table. It was William who spoke first.

Clearing his throat, he observed formalities. “Montgomery, you must not have met my younger sister. This is Beatrice, the reason for all of this.”

Beatrice smiled shyly at her brother’s words and dropped a shallow curtsy as George bowed.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, My Lady. I have heard such good things about you. Isabel writes of you, so fondly. I can see why. You are as beautiful and delicate as the daisy.”

Impressed by her own brother, Isabel turned to look at George. Pride swelled in her. Perhaps, they might make a man of him, yet.

“Thank you, My Lord. You are so kind.”

George was quick to correct. “Oh, I am no Lord. I am only a gentleman, bereft of titles.”

“A gentleman is all that matters.”

With that, Beatrice was helped into her seat by William, and the men settled once more.

Isabel said grace, and the dining began.

Lord William opted for rice and curry. Coincidentally, Isabel did likewise. George went for roasted lamb and veggies with hot brown

gravy made from the juice of the roasted lamb. Beatrice looked at everyone, looked into the dishes, and relaxed back on her chair.

“Pray, my lady, what could be the issue?” her brother who was first to notice, asked her.

She smiled to him for the first time in years and said, “Go ahead everyone, I will join you.”

“If you say so,” William replied.

Then, Beatrice reached for the porcelain plate and took a bit of food from all the dishes. Everyone glanced at her and her weird attitude but said nothing. There was an uncommon silence between them, which lasted for a while.

It was William who broke it, and with a light jest at that.

“Whoever said that British cuisine cannot compare to Europe’s finest must have never had a taste of the former. I cannot imagine anyone not falling in love with such fine meals!”

When everyone nodded, he continued, “In all honesty, aside the jesting, England is an incredible country with plenty of good food choices. I wonder indeed, what could have stirred up such an untrue statement.”

“I shall have to agree, My Lord,” George began, joining the conversation. “I have been overseas and have tasted a good number of delicacies. As delicious as they may be, I often find myself pining for home, for a good traditional meal to fill my belly.”

The men chuckled at this, but the women simply smiled. Deciding to follow the camaraderie that had settled in the air, Isabel joined in too.

“No one has ever said his mother’s food tastes bland,” she teased, reaching for a glass of lemon juice. As she brought the cup to her mouth, her eyes met with William’s and lingered for a moment.

She quickly looked away, downing the content of the glass in one long swig. Terribly improper, but she cared little. The hairs on the back of her nape had stood, and even as she went back to her meal, intent on not looking his way, she felt his eyes boring holes into her. It made her uneasy.

“Indeed, dear sister. But there is the place for truth and the place for delusion. I have simply spoken the former.”

Much to the surprise of everyone, Beatrice added in support, “I agree. Excellence births superiority,” Beatrice said to herself.

“It would appear the lady is as bright as she is beautiful. Truer words were never spoken. You favour the English cuisine, then?” It was George, and ever so smug from her agreement.

Beatrice lifted her shoulder in a small, almost dismissive shrug. “I cannot say that I do not. It is, indeed, of great quality. Nevertheless, I also enjoy the French cuisine the cook makes, every once in a while.”

There was a small agreeable silence, and they all appeared to be on the same page. Then, Beatrice spoke again, “Are you satisfied, My Lord? Seeing that your sister is in good health?”

They were all taken aback by the question. Seeing Beatrice so outspoken, it was quite a surprise.

George looked at Isabel, and they shared a moment. “Aye, I am. In all honesty, I had feared the worse. Now, my heart can rest easy, knowing that she fares well.”

“You must love her very much,” Beatrice observed quietly.

“Hmmm,” Isabel hummed.

“It is quite easy to see how much you care for each other. Seeing you two together, I can tell how closely knitted you are.”

Isabelle thought back to the story she had shared with Beatrice, and she wondered if the young lady was trying to mean something.

“Oh, indeed, we spent many days apart, as we grew. Nevertheless, the close bond we share kept our hearts strewn together, always.”

“I suppose that was why she did not hesitate to come charging in here like a madwoman demanding that I returned all that I had supposedly stolen from you, at whatever cost.”

Isabelle shifted uncontrollably in her seat as William’s words filled her ears. Surely, he would not mention the part about offering her body? She never wanted George to find out. Her brother would never forgive himself.

“There could have been no other reason. She loves me too much. As she upholds family values with all her might. I did not know of her intention. You can imagine the fear in my heart as I returned home and learned of what she had done. I was away at the time, you see. I would never have let her come, otherwise. Yet, despite my fear, I was not shocked. It was what Isabel would do.”

Isabel looked up at her brother as she heard the tenderness in his voice. Holding her gaze, he continued, “Isabel… stubborn and independent. Witty and humorous. Defiant. Unafraid of anyone or anything. For a long time, she has made me proud, as well as envious.”

“Envious?” Everyone asked in unison.

“Aye,” George continued. “Though not in the manner one might think. I was an indoor person who preferred arts and crafts to playing in the fields. Many times, I longed to be free of the cage I had put myself in. Alas, I could not be who I was not.”

Isabel smiled, her heart heavy with warmth. She reached across the table, took George’s hands, and squeezed.

“That was exactly my first impression of her,” William put in. “Fearless indeed. I could not fathom how a lady of her status would come barging into a man’s home without a care in the world. It was something I mulled over for some time. She was witty in her questions and had a way with words that could leave one helpless.”

Despite her better judgement, Isabel made the mistake of looking at him. The fierce attraction she saw in those eyes almost weakened her in the knees. Dear Lord, but this man was growing more potent to her desires by the day.

“I was foolish, thinking to drown my sorrows with the cards and the wine. I was even more foolish to think I could have bested you at a game of cards, My Lord. If not for Isabel, I would have lost everything. If I had simply handled my grief like the man Father brought me up to be, all of this would have been avoided. You wouldn’t be here, Isabel.”

“And neither would my sister. I mean here, at this moment, with us. Everything happens for a reason, would you not reckon? I do not think I could have found a better companion for Beatrice.”

“And… believe it or not, brother, it is quite lovely here. What is past is past. You do not need to badger yourself over the matter. In a short while, I shall be back home to you.”

“Father would be livid…”

“No, Father would have understood, and when he sees the man you’re being shaped into, he would be proud.”

“What were they like, your parents?” It was Beatrice who asked.

Isabel and George shared an uncomfortable look. They had not discussed their parents since the incident, but perhaps, now was a good time. They had already begun, after all.

“Oh, Father was the veritable man of the house. He was just and fair in his ways, but his word was law. There were times when he appeared cold, strict. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that he loved and cared for us, in his own way.”

“Yes, he did, George. He did.”

“He hoarded me, intent on shaping me into a better man.”

“And you two grew all the closer for it. Moreover, I got to spend fanciful time with Mother. And she loved us both very much. She would always think of you when we were able, everything she could gift, she picked for you.”

“Books. And paintings. She knew how passionate I was about my hobbies.”

“She was lovely and beautiful, filled with so much kindness. I do not think I ever saw her angry.”

“Never. It is Father’s temper you took, Isabel. As well as his red hair. Fiery as the lioness.”

She laughed at that, oddly enjoying the conversation. “And you took after Mother’s gentleness. You could not hurt a fly, even if you tried. Sounds like fair trade to me.”

“Aye. That it does.”

They finished then, and Isabel realised that a sudden weight had been lifted off her chest. She felt lighter, happier. The twinkle in George’s eyes told her he felt the same. They should have had this talk sooner.

“They sound like they were wonderful people.”

George and Isabel nodded in unison. “They were.”

Dinner ended then, and as the maids cleared the plates, the ladies rose up to retire for the night. The men, on the other hand, offered to visit William’s study for a little chit-chat.

Chapter 13

As the men settled in the study, William summoned the butler and had him bring the finest brandy. He was impressed when Montgomery declined, insisting he would have some of the fruit wine from dinner if there were any left.

Just as impressed as he had been by the man's mannerisms, his obvious love for his sister, and his accountability for his actions. It would appear that the young man was more responsible than William had supposed.

"Pray, how do you see those soldiers who visited the tavern the other day?" he asked, starting the conversation as he poured from his glass.

"I liked Mr. Wiggle's guts, though I hate it when warlords feel the only way to make peace is by intimidating the weak," the young lad responded.

"I do not care for him," Lord William declared unapologetically. He never loved what he hated. To him, it was a mark of pretentiousness. He prided himself in stating things as they were. No sugar coating.

George filled his glass with his wine and placed it gently on the table. Calmly, he said, "Ah… and no one can blame you. It has more to do with his person than his duty."

"Precisely. Being a member of the King's army, a man of status at all, tends to get to men's heads these days. Their thinking is affected, and they are left incapable of reason." He filled his glass and brought it to his mouth, his temper sour.

"Hmmm. You speak sense, My Lord. I too believe the society is now filled with lawlessness. No one respects the law. Look at how the night marauders go about dispossessing people of their property and

rendering them helpless. I thought this was the soldier's duty? Why do they parade with firearms and weapons of choice if they will not discharge their duties according to their pledges to government?"

Hmmm. It would appear the sound mind ran in the family. Montgomery was intelligent as well.

"The government has grown weak. They no longer care about the people, so we take laws into their hands, myself inclusive. How many times have I had to fight these so-called noblemen to protect the weak? How can a knight, after a night of eating and drinking, not deem it necessary to clear his debts? Instead, he takes to fighting and harassment?"

There was a moment's silence as they reflected upon these ills. Then, wanting to leave the foulness behind, William spoke, "Let's not dabble deeply in these matters. They are quite appalling and down-casting. I see you no longer drink wine?"

The young man looked longingly at the cup William held. It seemed to take great control to look away. Shaking his head, he responded, "No. I'm being careful not to get inebriated by these intoxicating liquids. They may have their good, howbeit, one needs be careful not to overindulge. After the incident that night, I have decided to stay off altogether. I fear I may not be able to caution myself once I begin. If I must keep my wits about, then it is a small price to pay."

Williams raised his glass in a toast. "I do not think I would ever say goodbye to the wine, but I respect your choice, and most of all, I respect your reasons. Here is to doing right by our women."

Montgomery joined in the toast, and afterwards, they continued to speak on other matters concerning business ventures and investments, until they both decided to call it a night.

George walked into the guest-chamber that had been prepared for him. He was proud that he had been able to resist the lure of wine, but even more glad that he had made this trip. From what he had seen so far, his sister was in good hands. He never knew that the Baron was as kind and thoughtful as he had come to see. Not that he had not had good reasons to be concerned – he had. Having witnessed the Baron maim a man on several occasions, he knew how brutal he could be. George could not recollect ever hearing anything good about him. However, his entire mindset about him was altered that night.

He was going to give Aunt Mariam the feedback about his sister's welfare. Aunt Mariam was so particular about Isabel's safety. She had done nothing but fret with worry, thinking up many ridiculous things. That Isabel would be defiled against her wishes, threatened to keep quiet… now, he could tell her that that was not the matter. That the Baron was kind when it came to women, noble enough.

Aunt Mariam would like that. She would finally rest easy, and perhaps, come to despise the Baron a little less.

With this thought on his mind, he changed into his nightdress. The last thing he thought of as the waves of sleep carried him away, was Aunt Mariam's pretty scarf.

Chapter 14

The night gradually peeled off, exposing the beauty and glamour of the morning. The morning breeze hit the trees, causing them to dance in merriment, their leaves smiling and clapping in unison.

Isabel was the first to get up. She opened the windows, and fresh air came rushing in. The flimsy nightdress she had slept in swayed to the seduction of the wind, flowing over her skin in a sweet whisper.

Drawn to the window, she held on to the sill and lifted her face to the heavens, mindless of the fact that anyone could see her from below. And oh, what a sight she would make.

She was a masterpiece of nature, indeed, and she knew how to carry herself gracefully. She had always been the envy of the maidens in her community. Her beauty was second to none, and so many lads and gentlemen had extended their hands of love towards her. No man had ever come across her without making passes at her. That had started even before she had gotten ripe for marriage. Now, they came in droves, and she could see the seriousness in their eyes, as well as their speeches.

Nevertheless, there had always been something missing. She never found love in the eyes of the suitors. Even though her mother had told her that love grew, that with time, she would start to enjoy her marriage, Isabel had never been able to come to terms with that. That had been the bone of contention between her mother and herself. It had almost caused a rift; thankfully, they had got past it.

“Does it mean you never loved Father?” she had asked one fateful day, leaning over her mother’s shoulder.

“Of course, I did,” her mother had responded, lovingly.

“So why do you reckon mine will be any different?” she had countered.

“I have never thought, nor said so, Isabel. I’m only concerned about your inability to choose among the numerous suitors you have. I wish you would, already.” Her voice had been patient, calm.

“But I am young still.”

“And you won’t remain so, much longer. I loved your father, Isabel, but not from the beginning. I had to grow to love him.”

“So, you would have me do the same?”

“Sit down; I pray you.” Her mother’s patience had begun to wane then. “Isabel, you love the flowers so much, do you not?’

“Of course I do.” She remembered wondering what the flowers had to do with any of this.

“When do you love them the most?”

“In spring, of course. In full blossoms, when they bloom lush and beautiful.”

“And what do you do to them, then?”

“I tend them, patiently, lovingly.”

“Yet, come autumn, they wither, do they not?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“And what do you do then?”

She had begun to grow weary, but she answered still.

“I sweep off the withered flowers, care for the ones that endure, and wait for spring to roll by again.”

Her mother had smiled then. “Isabel, a woman is just like a flower. A delicate one. In her prime, as she blooms in spring, she is loved and wanted by many. Howbeit, that time passes, and autumn comes. She withers, and everyone sweeps her away, in search of new buds to cherish, in anticipation of spring.”

It had finally become clear to her at that moment. “And a man? Does he ever wither?”

Her mother had found that amusing and had given in to a small chuckle.

“No, my love. That is not the way society works. It favours the men. As long as a man holds status and wealth, he shall ever be in his prime and be free to do as he pleases.”

Isabel was no naiveté; she had always known that the world favoured men. So, she had simply smiled, letting all of it go.

“May I think about what we’ve discussed, Mother?”

“You have all the time to do so, my daughter,” her mother had replied, planting a kiss on her forehead. “I think it’s high time you slept. You may go to bed. Rest easy, dear child. The angels guide you.”

“And you as well.” She had gone to bed that night, wishing that the world was a better place, that society allowed women to live as freely as men.

That discussion had happened only two weeks before her parents’ demise. Isabel had never gotten the chance to give her mother a response before the cold hands of death snatched her away. Her only consolation was that they had parted on good terms.

She wondered if she would have been able to tell her mother about a man such as the Baron. How her mother would have felt. Appalled, no less. Isabel could see her widened eyes and her dropped jaw. She could hear an instant rebuke.

It almost made her smile… a sad one.

She could no longer deny the fact that her heart beat for the Baron. It did not help that she knew he felt the same way. Oh… but she was not here for some romantic involvement with the lord of the manor. No, she had come here to help sweet Beatrice recover from her ailment and save her family from poverty.

She sighed, leaning against the side of the window. Just then, a bird flew past, catching her eyes. Another perched on the guava tree close to the window. It was a nightingale, beautiful to behold, and odd to see in the daytime.

Her attention was soon drawn by the sound of the workers filling the fields. Remembering that she was still improperly dressed, she tore herself from the window and decided to begin her day.

Just as she reached for her wardrobe, the dark-haired, fearsome-looking man crossed her mind again.

Ahhh… Alas, focusing on her purpose here was going to be harder than she reckoned.

William paced his room as soon as he got up from the bed. He clasped his palms and placed them close to his mouth as if in a praying position. He removed them and exhaled forcefully. He wondered if Isabel was chaste for a chaste girl would never freely offer her body to a man. That was not his major concern, though.

Did he even deserve a chaste girl? He could not reckon how many ladies he had crossed. He patronised ladies of the night and had forcefully taken the innocence of Rebecca, the daughter of the venerable of the Anglican communion, an action he did in the past and later regretted. He could not fathom how he managed to live such a fierce life even though he had a good heart. It was as a result of his past, he knew.

He was letting his guard down for Isabel. Her beauty was second to none. Perhaps, he wouldn't have lived such a ruthless life had he met her earlier on. He was going to try his best not to allow his loins reason for him again. However, he was not going to let her go. He was going to do everything within his power to make her his.

Suddenly, he remembered that he needed to do something outside. So, he opened the door of his chambers and stepped out, overshadowed by the beauty of the morning.

The Montgomery siblings decided to have a walk through the estate, allowing George to appreciate the beauty of nature and also to have a

simple walk with his sister, something he always longed to do, only that his sister never had any time for him.

Before then, Isabel had taken permission from Lord Gregory and Lady Beatrice to show her brother around the estate.

“That’s the horses.” She pointed towards the stable.

“I could see my horse. Behold how it stares at me.” George waved at his stallion.

“It recognised the owner,” Isabel said, both of them chuckling at that statement. The breeze was whirring hard, pushing her hair towards the right side of her face, with her gown swaying this way and that. She occasionally straightened out the hair and arranged it the proper way.

“So, how do you see your temporary home?” George asked his sister.

“Oh, so interesting. I love everyone, especially Lady Beatrice,” she cheerfully replied.

“Lady Beatrice or Lord William?” her brother asked her.

She was taken aback as she asked, “What do you mean, I pray you?”

“Nay! Nothing, I mean.” He chuckled. “Anyway, I’m really glad that you are finding here very interesting. Can we sit on that large stone and talk?”

“Don’t you want to explore the woods? It’s very beautiful as you can see.”

“Not at all. No harm meant, though. I prefer sitting by the brook and admiring the waters as they glide through the stones. Can you see that beautiful bird drinking water?”

“That’s a nightingale,” Isabel said. “I used to mistake it for a robin.”

“They look alike, only that you need to look very closely before you notice the difference,” George said while both of them sat quietly on a big stone, careful not to disturb the little bird drinking water.

“Father used to say that a nightingale is like a plain book outside, but so interesting once you open it,” Isabel said. Immediately, another one began to sing on a tree not far from their sitting position, oblivious to its environment.

“Just like that one,” George said, pointing at it. “Because of their almost plain feathers, one would barely get interested in them until he hears them sing.”

“Exactly! Common nightingales are called Lucina. I think they are the ones that sing both night and day.”

“I guess that is one, then,” George said. Before his sister could say something, he added smiling, “You used to remind me of the nightingale.”

Surprised, she asked how.

“You have always been an amazing personality. So gentle, yet a brave, courageous, and strong woman. I admire your strength and wisdom.”

“Wow! Thank you, brother.”

“I have a confession to make,” George said. Isabel’s heart skipped in

split seconds. “Nay! Not what you think, girl.”

They both laughed softly as he tapped her lightly on the hand.

“I have a collection of poems and stories I wrote about you.”

“Pray, you don’t mean it.”

“I’m serious. They’re very interesting. You have been such a great sister. I know I misbehaved. I acted ignorantly by drinking and gambling, thinking that was a way out, not knowing the harm I caused for myself,” he said, handing a piece of writing to his sister.

Isabel was shocked to the marrows as she went through it. Her brother had poured encomiums on her, reminding her of how special she was and how lucky he was to have her as a sister. She never believed her eyes as a teardrop fell from her eyes onto the script.

“It’s OK, dear. You have always been my friend; I know you didn’t know I loved you so deeply.”

The nightingale by the brook flew away and joined the one by the lofty tree. Both of them flew further into the forest, leaving the Montgomery siblings all alone.

“Brother, look!” Isabel screamed, pointing towards a reptile, gliding out of the stone they sat on. Perhaps, it was resting and was disturbed by their presence.

George looked towards the direction she was pointing as she scampered. He saw a long brownish object. Very beautiful and innocent looking. If one didn’t know what it was, one could actually pick it up and cuddle it. But it was a snake. There hasn’t been anywhere on record where snakes are innocent.

“That is an adder!” George said while both of them walked away for safety. “It is harmless unless provoked. It loves a cool environment, just as you and I.”

“Do you liken us to snakes?” Isabel asked as they walked towards the estate.

“Not so, My Lady. You are a beautiful lady. I only meant that both of us also like a cool environment as well.”

She nodded. A few steps away was the Baron, probably taking a walk. She got a glimpse of his huge frame; her heart skipped, and if one could look into her eyes, sparks of light emanated from them. She ignored the feeling growing inside her, though a herculean task, and asked her brother, “How is Aunt Mariam?”

“She is doing fine. She sent her greetings.”

“And you never told me?” she teased him.

They both laughed, walking back to the Gregorian abode, feeling better and grateful for the little time they shared.

In the evening...

“My Lord, I am extremely grateful for the pardon granted to me over the estate. I must admit to the careless demeanour I exhibited, which led to my losing my inheritance. I must confess that I didn’t deserve the grace. It’s such an honour, My Lord.” That was George to the Baron as they walked towards the stable. His sister was right beside him, clinging to his left arm, while Williams was on his right. He stopped and faced George, focusing more on the figure by his left

hand.

“You are one of the humblest lads I’ve come across in this province,” Lord William said to George, extending a hand of appreciation towards him.

“It’s an honour, My Lord. I must confess that I was sceptical about her general situation in the estate, which was one of the reasons why I came to observe things myself. However, I commend you for taking good care of her. You are a good man.”

His sister smiled, conscious of the presence of the Baron.

“I’m glad you came around to dwell with us. Better still, I’m glad for your sister who took up the challenge. For the first time, Lady Beatrice smiled at me yesterday, courtesy of the lady beside you.”

“That was a great observation, My Lord,” Isabel said to him, lowering her face to avoid his gaze.

He giggled, shaking the right hand of George. “I hope to see you again. It was great interacting as friends for the first time.”

“I hope so too. Take care of My Lady, please,” George reminded him. Turning to his sister, he gave her a warm hug. Coincidentally, the stable boy brought his horse, clean and ready to be mounted upon.

They all exchanged pleasantries for the last time as George saddled his horse and headed back home, a happy man.

Chapter 15

George got home late in the night. It had been a very hectic day for him, coupled with the fact that the journey was stressful and long. He didn't need to stress himself much, for which reason he went straight to his bedchamber. He removed his shoes, then his coat and breeches. He bared himself and went straight to the bathroom, where he washed away the stress of the day.

He got inside, wore his pajamas, and laid down. The sleep was such a precious one that he never woke up again, except when nature called, until morning. He got up and went straight to the kitchen. He boiled water in the kettle and made a mug of black coffee, took it to his bedchamber, and sipped it slowly, savouring every flavour.

There was a light knock on the door, and George invited the person in. It was Richard, the housekeeper. He handed him a letter signed by Aunt Mariam. He thanked him and waited for him to close the door before opening the letter. His eyes were filled with tears as he read each word.

Aunt Mariam had left!

He was frustrated and disappointed at the same time. What could have made her leave? Why would she choose to go that way? She knew what calamity had befallen them not long before. She knew how it had been difficult for them to cope. She knew that she was the mother they could see, having lost their biological mother to the cold hands of death. Why could she not, at least, wait to say goodbye to him and Isabel? He didn't even know how to relay such a painful message to his sister. She was so fond of Aunt Mariam and had been longing for the day she would carry her train as her bridesmaid. Now, she was gone! No address was given to trace her whereabouts!

He dropped the paper on the bed and paid enough attention to the water flowing down his eyes in torrents. As he wept, he felt pain in his heart and wished it was not true. But it was unarguably true.

It was at that moment that he realised why she had encouraged him to go and visit Isabel earlier than planned. He never knew it was a way of sending him out before escaping. There was nothing else he could do than to wonder why she had not deemed it necessary to let him know why she was leaving. He slowly consoled himself and wiped his face, leaving everything pending when he would figure out what happened or probably, meet her, and she would explain to him by herself. He only wished and prayed that the reason would be a positive one.

After breakfast, Lady Beatrice laid on the bed a while before going over to the bookshelf. She brought out different books on poetry and finally settled on one. It was a collection of Anna Bradstreet's poetries. Anna was the first female poet and was immortalised because of her contributions to the world of poetry. Lady Beatrice went through her biography for the first time since the book laid in the shelf and was stunned at her rich profile.

"Anne Dudley Bradstreet (1612-1672) was the first poet to be published in the British North American colonies. Her first poetry collection was The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up, which was originally published in 1650. It had critical acclaim in both the Old and the New World.

Her publications were made possible as she was highly educated for her time, having studied history, languages, and literature. Both Anne's father and her husband were involved in the founding of Harvard in 1636, and her sons Simon and Samuel attended the university. There is now a gate dedicated to her, The Bradstreet Gate, in recognition of her being the first published poet...

Lady Beatrice instantly loved Anna and was awed at what the woman could achieve in her short stay on Earth. For the first time, she had a deep thought over her life. She knew she was deteriorating in that cocoon of a room she was hidden in, but how was she going to leave, snap out of the walls? She sniffled back tears as they welled up in her

eyes, but not without a drop landing on the face of Anna Bradstreet. The film spread immediately to the other parts, subsequently, covering the whole face.

Beatrice smiled. A dry smile. However, the smile was going to play a great role in her recovery. That was the second time she had smiled since she was twelve.

There was a rap on the door. Then, a second one. And a third. She urged the person to come in, knowing who it could be. Luckily, it was the person she expected to see.

Isabel smiled at her, and she smiled back. She could see that the drapes at the window had been shifted to the left, and the room was fully illuminated, unlike the day she made her debut appearance there. She went closer and looked at the book in Lady Beatrice's hand.

"Anna Bradstreet," Lady Beatrice said.

Isabel nodded.

"Do you know her?" Lady Beatrice asked innocently.

"Yes, I do. Though scarcely. I know she was a poet. Nothing more. George knows her better because he's into poetry as well."

"That's good. Does he equally write?"

Isabel nodded.

Lady Beatrice was astonished. That meant she herself could write. Perhaps, she would try to do so one day.

“Do you write?” Isabel asked, sitting beside her.

She shook her head.

“Why?” Isabel demanded.

“I have not made any attempt before.”

“Why have you not made any attempt yet? What does it take to do so?” Isabel queried her. They both giggled as she realised how mean the questions sounded.

“Anyway, I think I could do so one day. What do you think, Isabel?”

That was the first time she had addressed Isabel by her name. She was used to calling her Miss Montgomery.

“You know that adage that says, ‘a day begins a story’?” Isabel asked her, and she responded with a nod. “I think that adage was referring to you.”

They both laughed again. This time around, Beatrice laughed harder than before.

“But how do I start? Perhaps, you have an idea.”

“You can start anywhere!” Isabel replied matter-of-factly.

“Like?” That was Beatrice.

“My Lady, do you know you could write about anything? Your bed, your books, your house, your...” She paused before adding, “... brother.” She didn’t know what she thought about her brother and didn’t want to hurt her feelings by any means. As a matter-of-fact, her mission was to help her condition.

“OK. Now, I understand. Can I write about you?”

“Why not,” Isabel answered before realising she meant her. She wondered what she could write about her. The previous day, her brother astonished her. This day was Lady Beatrice’s turn.

“What are you thinking about?” Lady Beatrice asked her, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“Nothing, My Lady. I was thinking you could also write about nature. I mean, the breeze, the brooks, stones, birds...” She remembered the nightingale of the previous day and added, “You can write about the nightingale too. It’s a very beautiful and special bird.”

“I don’t know much about it. In fact, I have only seen it in drawings.”

“Pray, My Lady, how would you know it, except you come outside? It lives in the forest; it doesn’t compact itself in a secluded room like yours. Would you not like to admire the beauty of nature? You could watch the waters flow, the birds chirp incessantly, the horses gallop, the winds blow past the trees causing the leaves to wave their hands at you and so many beautiful works of nature out there.”

Beatrice nodded in satisfaction, urging Isabel to continue.

“Look at the great artists. They love the outer world, even though most of them are indoor persons. However, they come outside, behold the beauty of nature and then, go inside to draw.”

Tears began to roll down the eyes of Lady Beatrice. She knew her friend was right. What more encouragement did she need?"

She wiped her face before Isabel could notice. However, she noticed and stopped talking, allowing her to breathe in and expel the warm air. Then, to her surprise, Beatrice said, "I shall write about you, Isabel. You are a great friend." The statement was laden with emotion. They both got up and embraced each other, feeling the warmth of the other spread blissfully through their bodies.

It was the moment her healing process began.

It was autumn again, the season Lady Beatrice loved so much. The weather was warm and dry, together with the sun blessing the day. The leaves of the trees were characterised by yellow and orange colours, giving the country a beautiful outlook. It was a period lovers enjoyed the most for they could sit out under the trees in the parks or at the meadow, enjoying each other's company.

Beatrice was so particular about this season because of so many beautiful memories attached to it. Gradually, she had begun to appreciate the beauty of life, though yet to fully grasp the concept of having to walk around or enjoy a horse ride as her friend did. From her window, she could look far into the forest and watch as some animals displayed their natural characteristics without any disturbance and interference. Sometimes, she would smile at them, as if telling them that she was seeing them. There was a particular time she was lucky to find two foxes courting. It was such a wonderful moment as she thought about what it felt like to have a male companion who would hold your hand, touch your forehead, tuck in your hair, and even kiss your lips passionately and make you moan. She could not remember where and when, but she had heard about women moaning while the men kissed their full lips and caressed their bodies. She hadn't known what it meant to have sex, and she tried her best to avert her mind from wandering into that region. It was sacred and reminded her much about the past. Not just the past, but the

reason for her disintegration from her brother, an act she was gradually getting to forgive herself for. Not as one would think, but her past always came haunting her, reminding her that she was not supposed to live. What if her brother died that day? How would she have interpreted the situation? Howbeit, it was not her fault. She was out there to have fun, just like her mates, but unable to mark the territory termed 'out of bounds'.

That was in the past now. Here she was, admiring the beauty of autumn and the colouration of the leaves. Just the previous month, the trees were green with beautiful leaves. Now, they were more beautiful than the previous month. She used to have a friend back then named Lilian, who loved the green leaves. Several times, she got lost and was found among the trees, tucking into the leaves and making beautiful designs on them. They stopped being friends after that horrible night the incidence happened. She wondered where Lilian could be. Probably, attending the London season in search of a husband. Probably, married. Lady Beatrice thought so because of how hyperactive her friend used to be. She loved attending the balls and enjoyed it when boys told her how beautiful she was. Lilian was indeed beautiful, but not as beautiful as Lady Beatrice, the girl that got the best attention from the boys. She sighed as she reminisced about the past. Thank goodness, she had a sharp memory and could vividly recollect so many events that happened.

The only event she never remembered was the death of her mum. She sighed, wondering what it felt like to have a mother. She retired to the bed, waiting for Isabel to come so that she could ask her so many questions bothering her mind. As if reading her mind, Isabel knocked silently on the door, and Beatrice let her in.

"My Lady, still on the bed?" Isabel asked.

"Not what you think, my dear. I have been up since, just relaxing now. Do sit down, please."

Isabel sat on the chair, facing her. The rays of sunshine were gradually entering the room, which showed that the morning was folding up and giving way for the afternoon. It was hot out there, and inside,

Isabel picked up a hand fan, cooling the room with each stroke of her hand.

“What does it look like to enjoy a mother’s care and love?” Lady Beatrice asked Isabel, smiling because Isabel was taken aback by the question. She never expected such a question from her.

Isabel smiled back, revealing her beautiful dentition, and she said, “It felt good to have a mother, and not just a mother, but a caring one.”

“Perhaps, I would not have been in this condition had there been a mother figure in my life,” Beatrice said, scratching her eyebrow.

“Perhaps not. That was why I added a caring one.”

“Definitely, mine was caring. I knew because Father never stopped talking about her before he joined her. William still says good things about her once in a while.”

At the mention of Lord William, Isabel shuddered as cold chills passed through her spine. Was she falling for him? She brushed the thought aside, for that was not her reason for coming to live in the estate. Her business was to tend to the lady sitting opposite her. She smiled, enjoying the fact that her friend was gradually getting back to life and opening up to her as well.

“What are you thinking about?” Lady Beatrice brought her back to reality.

“Nothing, My Lady,” Isabel replied, still smiling. She placed her right hand to touch Beatrice lightly on the knee.

“But you were smiling?” Beatrice accused her.

“Was I? I never knew,” Isabel tried to cover up; however, she was silenced by another question from Beatrice.

“Tell me, are you in love with any young man?”

“Young man? No!” Isabel replied sharply, not ready to be defeated by her friend.

“You are, My Lady. I could see it in your eyes. Would you not like to tell me, for truly, we are friends now?”

“My Lady, we are more than friends now, we are sisters. You are the sister I never had.”

“Then, I pray, tell me who the young man is. Is it my brother? Does he know you love him?”

“My Lady!” Isabel screamed, blushing heavily. “Stop it!”

They both laughed and talked about other things like horse riding and tree climbing, the hobbies Isabel enjoyed as a child. She still did, only that she had gradually given up on tree climbing.

Later in the day, Lady Beatrice, with mixed feelings, got up and walked towards the windows, fondling the drapes. She faced the outside, from where she could see far into the forest. It was a beautiful sight. Focusing on the beauty of the nature, she had so many things going on in her mind. Her mind first strayed to her childhood days. She could remember when her father would put her on the horse, and they would ride around the city, while she laughed and leaned back against her father’s body. She enjoyed the horse riding, especially every weekend.

Sometimes, the whole family could go sightseeing and picnicking, and they would use the woods or the meadows as their location. With her on her father's back and him holding little William's hand. She could chatter about anything, asking some hilarious questions, making everyone laugh. She was a very lively girl.

"Father, why do we have to pass out the feces in the toilet?"

Her father would have to think deeply before giving his response. "My little girl, that's because we are human beings. Human beings make use of the restrooms, while animals could do it anywhere."

"How lucky the animals are!" Without much ado, she would add, "Father, I want to be an animal."

Her brother, flabbergasted by the manner his sister always asked questions would ask her, "Why do you choose to be an animal, instead of a human being. Don't you think it's kind of weird?"

"Yes, daughter. It sounds weird to say so. But, I pray thee, what reason could my beautiful girl have for preferring to be an animal?" her father would ask, supporting his son's viewpoint.

"Father, animals are free. Can't you see? Look at the birds chirping to the merriment of our souls," she said, pointing to a little hummingbird on a tree that was scratching its body. "They can do anything they like."

"Don't you do anything you like as well?"

"Nay, Father. I am sometimes silenced when I talk too much. If I went to bed and wanted to sleep throughout the day, the maidens would come to my chamber to remind me it's morning. Oh, how I hate mornings!" she would say.

“That’s because you are lazy!” her brother would tease her.

Her face would change to that of a sad girl. “I am not lazy. I want freedom!”

Tears trickled down her face as she remembered how she loved freedom, just to float around and do nothing all day, except that which her soul longed to do. She wondered what happened, though she knew why things never remained the same after that fateful night. The night that saw her fall into nervousness, a sickness that had made her become the shadow of her real self. She backed the room properly to avoid Isabel noticing that she was shedding tears.

She remembered how her brother could be on her nerves whenever she chose to ask silly but funny questions, yet, she could feel the love in his voice. She knew he loved her. But he changed. He stopped caring and left her alone in her own world, one of the reasons she chose not to be friendly anymore. She still didn’t understand how Isabel managed to get into her innermost chamber, the chamber of her heart where she stored all the pains and debris of life. The chamber that had become too heavy from the kind of weird thoughts going on in it. The chamber that she longed to relieve of its contents but didn’t know how to. She would remain grateful to Isabel for coming into her life.

Now, she was feeling better, especially, as the tears rolled down in balls without any inhibition. She felt like someone being released from the prison of her life, a self-imposed prison. She could see the sky bright and beautiful with different shades of blue and grey. It was indeed smiling. “Could I smile like the sky?” she questioned herself.

“Yes, you could, My Lady. That is if you choose to.” It was Isabel.

Beatrice spoke aloud, and Isabel could hear her vividly enough to

know that she had been sobbing. She had decided to leave her alone to herself because she knew how much it helped to relieve one of the restrictions one imposed on himself or herself. She had learnt how to break free from self-restrictions and would be the happiest person to see her new friend do so.

She helped her to wipe her face with a piece of kerchief on the bed. Beatrice didn't stop her; rather she adjusted her face for Isabel to have a glimpse of and wipe it properly.

"Do you want to waste all day crying, My Lady?" Isabel asked her.

She shook her head.

"Why, then, should we not go out there and have a great time among the trees and shrubs? Can't you hear Mother Nature beckoning us to come and have a great chat with her and feel the cool breeze against our bodies? Do we have to stay indoors all day, knitting patterns and embroidery? Do not forget that you promised to write about me. I would like you to write about me while you are outside, instead of being in this secluded room."

Lady Beatrice nodded.

"Why don't you go to the bathroom, wash your face and come, let's go out and be free?" Isabel suggested.

As soon as she heard the word, free, her countenance brightened up like that of the morning sun and knew that that was exactly what she needed.

Chapter 16

Lady Beatrice was at the closet, confused about what dress to wear. She was at sea over what to wear despite having so many of them. She brought out a brown gown with cream embroidery at the hem. It looked beautiful and fitted her paleness, but not so much brightness glistened from it. She wanted something striking and spot on. She searched through the cluster of dresses and still couldn't find something that struck her fancy.

She was not to be blamed for her inability to select a befitting dress despite how much effort she had put. She was used to the maid selecting her dress and getting her dressed up. But since the emergence of Isabel in the estate, she had been doing it herself. It never mattered what she put on because she was not going to any balls or occasions that required special dressing to attend.

As Beatrice stood there, not knowing what to select, Isabel who was seated on the chair, head relaxed back and humming a song, realised that it had taken much more time than necessary for her to appear in the room. Isabel sat up, caressed her face with her slender fingers, called out to Lady Beatrice. When she couldn't hear any response, she became apprehensive, jumped up from her seat, and headed towards the closet. She got there and found her friend resting on the door frame, lost in her own little world.

"My Lady, what have you been up to?" she asked.

"Nothing, Isabel."

"Then, why have you not put on something?"

"To be sincere, I'm lost. I'm confused about what to put on. Can you help me make a better choice? I trust your judgement."

“Whatever makes My Lady happy,” Isabel said. Beatrice shifted for her to have a clearer view of the closet. She randomly selected two different gowns. As she brought them out, she separately placed them on Beatrice’s body and checked out their fittings.

Finally, they selected a green satin gown with flowery designs at the bust. It had a round neck with about five buttons in a row at the back. At the waist, it curved a little, thereby, exposing the shape of her derriere. The buttons were separated, and Beatrice slid into it. Her radiance glittered as she smiled at the mirror, admiring herself. She applied some blushes at her cheeks and a glossy liquid on her lips. Isabel helped her to arrange her hair. It was made into a ponytail, and she held it with a clip.

Beatrice blushed as they stepped down the stairs. Her confidence was raised, and she thanked her friend for coming to her rescue.

“Anything for My Lady,” Isabel replied.

They held hands as they stepped into the large courtyard.

“Good afternoon, My Lady,” greeted Rachel with a curtsy.

“Afternoon to you. Did you perchance have a glimpse of the Baron today.”

“Yes, My Lady. He is resting at the balcony,” the maid replied.

“That is good. Please, tell him that his attention is needed by us.”

“What for My Lady?” Isabel who had been watching with sealed lips asked as Rachel stood momentarily, just to ensure that they reached a consensus.

“Probably, to act as a chaperone to us,” Beatrice replied with a smile.

“I would have preferred both of us to walk alone.”

“It doesn’t make any difference.”

“If you say so,” Isabel replied, not wanting to argue with her.

The maid quickly left to deliver her message, while both of them stood there, silently waiting for her response.

“I guess she doesn’t like you,” Beatrice said, breaking the silence.

“Why do you think so?” surprised, Isabel asked her.

“It was written in her eyes. I feel she sees you as competition.”

“Why should she think so? I am not a member of this home,” Isabel said, creasing her face. “As a matter of fact, I will leave very soon, and she will still continue to enjoy her master and mistress.”

Beatrice’s countenance changed to that of sadness when Isabel mentioned her leaving soon. “Can I come visiting once in a while?” she asked.

“Why not? Like I said before...” While the statement still hung in Isabel’s mouth, she heard the Baron’s baritone voice as he spoke from behind.

It was obviously possible that he was drunk for his speech betrayed him. He hadn’t returned early the previous night, and Isabel was awake the major part of the night thinking about him and curious about his safety. When he finally got home, she could sense that he

was drunk because his voice was slurry, and one could barely hear him. She prayed fervently for his sister not to hear his voice, especially for the fact that she no longer found him so interesting as a brother. One of the reasons she was astonished when Lady Beatrice talked about his accompanying them on their little voyage. Though Isabel did not see anything wrong with it, notwithstanding, she would have preferred an all girls' walk out.

The Baron was down with veisalgia as result of the previous night out. He managed to relax and regain full consciousness at the balconette, just outside his bedchamber. He had been sleeping all day, particularly, for the fact that he was away almost all night gambling and enjoying the liquor with the men of suspicious reputation. With his skills, years of experience and knowledge in gambling, coupled with the fact that the odds were always in his favour, he was able to make a fortune from his fellow gamblers, most of whom were still amateurs in the game. He could vividly recall how he lost so many times to the champions of the game until he learnt from his losses. He had learnt that for one to win, he must have lost several times. He had become the champion and even had some amateurs coming to learn the art of gambling from him. He saw himself as a superhero who was indomitable. This, some people, especially the losers to the game might not want to take. Sometimes, they made trouble with him, just to ensure that they didn't completely lose out on the game. Sometimes, the trouble escalated to the exchange of fisticuffs and breaking of bottles, of which he must reciprocate to avoid being termed a weakling, a name that never resounded with his personality. He was brave and strong and would definitely prove his worth to remain afloat on the water.

Usually, after the long gambling and drinking, he would end up with the kind ladies of the night who would be more than willing to lie with him. Though a man of bad reputation and high-risk profile, it had never been on record that he cheated anyone or did any transaction without fulfilling his own side of the bargain. That was a part of the major reasons why the prostitutes were always more than willing to have him screw them. Moreover, everyone saw him as a champion and always having some disposable money to have fun with. Therefore, the ladies were always available and willing to have a

bite from the chunk of his pecuniary power.

However, the previous night was an exceptional case. Even as the half-clad ladies approached him, wriggling their waists on his sturdy loins, he resolved not to be with any of them to their uttermost dismay. Immediately after midnight and the time the owner of the tavern was to withdraw for the night, he mounted his horse and rode home. He still found his action absurd. What could make him, a man who was known for his sexual prowess and defiance regarding the bed, ignore the ladies and return home?

The answer was not far-fetched. The answer was hidden somewhere in his manor. He had had a fair share of his conscience murdering him for going back to gambling, even as he tried to resolve to give up on it. He knew that he had already had a bad reputation and would not want to continue nursing it. Perhaps, his sister recoiled to her shell because of his reckless, irresponsible lifestyle. Perhaps, if he had tried his best not to allow the incidence of that night to grab a better part of him, he would not have been seen this way in the eyes of the people. Who knows? He might have become a priest or serving in the sacristy.

He chuckled softly and shook his head at the thought of becoming a clergyman. He knew it would be an impossible mission because he found himself unworthy to serve in the house of God, a holy and undefiled place. Moreover, he had always fantasised about getting married and becoming a responsible husband and father. Yes, he loved it when his parents were alive. He loved their union and their little stay on Earth and wished to have that kind of union, though not wishing that either he or his wife should die young. He knew that his mother's death shook his father and affected their family's togetherness. His sister had no mother figure to look up to. She was left at the mercy of the maids and housekeepers. He was not going to die young; he was going to live for his family.

However, his lifestyle said otherwise. He was going to change, come what may if he must fulfill his obligation. He was not going to be a bad father or husband. At that moment, he remembered Isabel and

prayed in his mind that she had no inkling about his escapades the previous night. He had begun falling for her and would not like her to see him in the other light. Yes, he was aware that she did not have a memorable picture of him; nevertheless, he was not going to let her catch him red-handed again, as a drunken fellow, a gambler, an urchin, or one who patronised the ladies of the night.

He was still lost in his thoughts when Rachel tapped on the door.

“Who is there?” he queried with an unarticulated speech.

“I am the one, My Lord,” Rachel replied.

“You can come in,” he ordered her.

She entered and curtsied before him. Then, she spoke, “My Lord, Lady Beatrice and her acquaintance sent me to you. They prayed you accompany them for a walk.”

“Lady Beatrice?” He was astounded by what he heard. He never believed his sister could leave the confines of her bedchamber to come outside. In order not to keep the maid waiting, he asked her, “Where are they, I pray you?”

She curtsied for the second time and said, “They are on the patio.”

“That’s right,” he said. “Tell them that I will be there in a twinkle of an eye.”

Rachel left, and he went inside, put on his hat, and walked outside, glad to meet the two ladies in a cheerful mood.

Chapter 17

His eyes met hers, and she was held spellbound by his striking looks. She looked away, only to find Rachel staring at her in a wicked and suspicious way. It dawned on her that Lady Beatrice was right after all. However, she dismissed it as a normal look and never saw it from the point of jealousy.

“My Lady, I greet you,” he said as he wrapped his arms around his sister, taking her in. He was overwhelmed when she remained in his arms, an act that showed that she was recuperating indeed.

“Good evening, Lord William,” Isabel greeted him, her voice shaky, even though she fought hard to conceal it.

“My goodness! How are you doing, my dear?” the Baron asked, momentarily leaving hold of his sister and focusing on Isabel.

“As you can see, I’m doing fine,” she replied, blushing.

He held her hand and lingered a bit, while his eyes searched hers. She reciprocated until Lady Beatrice cleared her throat, reminding them of her presence. They released their hold on each other, and the Baron said,

“Alright, ladies I got information that my services as the best male chaperone in this county are needed by my noble ladies. How, I pray you, may I be of help?”

They all burst into hysterical laughter as he led them away, feeling like a chaperone indeed.

“Tell me, My Ladies, where do we go from here?” the Baron asked as they left the manor.

“Do we head towards the jardin de château? Truly, I miss the blessedness of that cottage,” suggested the sister.

Jardin de château was an ancient cottage once owned by a French florist who came to dwell amongst the natives. He married one of the beautiful maidens, Mabel, and had two children, a boy and a girl. He loved his family to a fault. Alas, one fateful day, he returned from a trip to find his family all lying on the floor, dead. He wailed like an infant. A physician was invited, and a harmful vegetable was discovered in the soup they had, just that afternoon. He left the cottage to an unknown destination and never returned to this day.

That was the hidden secret behind the cottage, and no one had been brave enough to inhabit it. As a florist, the Frenchman, Monsieur Fabre cultivated different flowers and plants. Lady Beatrice used to seek comfort amongst the flowers, especially for the scent of the rose garden. It was a pale pink rose with beautiful petals. During her childhood, she was fond of decorating her hair with different colours of rose flower which brought out her beauty. She sang melodiously to herself and tried different dance steps. However, due to her ailment, she never went there again, not even once had she desired to seek comfort amongst the flowers. It was a great relief to her brother when she chose to go to her favourite hideout.

“Alright. If you say so, My Lady.”

“I have a different idea, My Lady,” suggested Isabel.

“What may that be?” Lord William asked, smiling sensuously at her.

“My Lord, I have come to enjoy the coolness of the brook. It is my favourite, and I really wanted to go there with Lady Beatrice.”

“It matters not, My Lady. I hope you felt not offended?” the Baron asked while Beatrice slid her hand around Isabel’s waist, a way of

buying her into going with them.

“Not at all, My Lord. Her wish is my command,” Isabel replied, squeezing her fingers comfortingly.

Beatrice smiled and said, “I loved the bloom of roses. It made me feel special in a way. It’s quite unfortunate that we do not have such flowers in the garden here. Though even if such were grown here, I would have still preferred to leave the confines of the estate to somewhere else.”

Isabel nodded.

They walked silently towards the cottage, walking past different flowers like violets, primroses, and daisies. Suddenly, they got to the gate of the cottage. It was a petite, beautiful, charming little cottage, though looking abandoned. However, it still retained its grace and charm.

“We will not go further from here, My Ladies,” announced the Baron.

“Why do you want so?” asked Beatrice who was always interested in ‘why’s’, her reason being that every ‘why’ had a deeper answer than any other question.

“I think it is for our safety,” Isabel responded. Lady Beatrice nodded, and her brother glanced at Isabel. However, she didn’t feel uncomfortable this time around. She was now used to him and had developed a special liking for him. Instead of the usually uncomfortable feeling ladies experienced in the company of a male admirer, she felt comfortable, relaxed, and protected.

“I was a horse girl when I was young,” she recounted.

“Really? Pray tell, dear Lady,” Lord William enquired, while Lady

Beatrice reached out to a cluster of floribunda rose and plucked out two flowers. She looked at its apricot-yellow colour and admired it for a very long time. Then, she brought it closer to her nose, inhaled, and smiled, taking in all the scents at once.

“Do you know what I love most about this particular rose flower?” she asked no one in particular.

“Nay, My Lady,” the Baron said.

Concurrently, Isabel said, “Tell us, My Lady.”

“Its compactness. It is resistant to the powdery mildew and rose rust. Oh! How I enjoyed to be lost amongst these flowers with their honey perfume!” The duo looked at her and smiled. It was obvious she was engrossed in her own little world.

In order not to disturb her, the Baron asked Isabel to tell him more about her experience as a horse girl.

“It was an adventurous experience,” she said. “Father made it so. I would not forget countless times he took me out, teaching me how to ride on horsebacks. I would never take that love for granted.”

The Baron nodded and urged her to continue, at the same time, putting an eye on Beatrice. He held Isabel’s hand and gently stroked her fingers, feeling the softness of it.

She smiled. That was exactly what she longed for, his touch. Though, she would have preferred it in a special way, just the two of them.

“Hey, My Lady, what are you thinking about?” he asked her.

She smiled and said, “Nothing, My Lord. Just remembering the past

experiences I had with Father. He was a peaceful man."

He looked piercingly into her eyes, cold flames escaping from his eyes. She reciprocated. Conscious of the presence of Lady Beatrice, she looked away and slowly, but carefully disengaged her hand from his.

"I'm sorry, My Lord," she added, her voice hushed and shaky. "I was talking about the horses."

The Baron made a smiley face, enjoying the torture his presence sent to her body. Suddenly, Lady Beatrice turned around and said, "I've had a fulfilling day. Coming to the jardin de château is a great medicine." Her facial expressions were comforting and satisfactory.

"I love that. Do we call it a day, then?" her brother asked.

"Yes, My Lord." Turning to Isabel, she asked, "Would you mind, My Lady?" reaching for her hair and caressing it. She arranged it properly, removing a dry leaf. Her brother tucked in a stray strand of hair from her temple back to the right position.

Isabel felt loved by the brother and sister standing beside her and working on her hair. "Not at all, My Lady. Shall we go now?"

They all headed home, with Beatrice's hair full of floribunda and purple roses which gave her a beautiful look.

"You look more beautiful in those flowers," her brother teased her.

"Really? I was hoping you would scold me like you once did when I was a child," she replied.

"That was then. You were obsessed with your floribunda that one could build a castle with them," he exaggerated.

Both ladies laughed at his silliness. He joined them, and one could see how much loved each of them felt in the company of one another. They reached the manor in twenty minutes. Beatrice climbed the stairs back to her room, giving both of them warm hugs and thanking them for making her evening a memorable one.

“Take care, My Lady,” Lord William said to her.

“And don’t forget to remove those floribunda pins from your hair,” Isabel added. There was a round of giggles. The duo stood there and watched her go out of sight, and then, they turned around towards the patio down to the pathway leading to the brooks.

“How do you see your sister now?” Isabel asked him the moment they were out of sight.

“Oh! She is clearly back to herself, and I must commend you for that, My Lady.”

Isabel rolled her eyes as she plucked the leaf of a daffodil stretching forth its hand towards her.

“Why did you roll your eyes? I expected an acknowledgement from you,” he teased her.

“Is that so?” she asked him. Before he could understand her, she went on her knees and bowed her head. “Thank you, his majesty.”

“Come on!” he replied, helping her to her feet as both of them released a hilarious outburst.

“You are sweet to be with,” he said to her, holding her hand.

She wriggled her hand out, not wanting to cause a stir in his system. Then, she said, “Tell me about your childhood, My Lord.” She raised her head, her eyes momentarily meeting his.

He exhaled heavily and said, “My childhood! It was fun and painful.”

“Can I hear the fun part?”

“No, My Lady. I will start with the painful part. Not so painful, but painful enough to leave a long scar on my face.” He paused, tracing the scar with his right index finger and added, “And cause a nervous disposition for my sister, Lady Beatrice.” He shook his head in grief as the last statement escaped his mouth. His hat almost fell off, but his right hand was handy.

Isabel exhaled softly but said nothing. She saw a deadwood and sat on it, expecting to hear more from him.

“Are you exhausted?” he asked her compassionately.

“No, not at all. You have been great company, I must confess.”

He gave her a little punch on the right ear and laughed. “You have been more than company; you are a great companion,” he appended.

She stretched out her right hand; he took it into his and helped her up.

“Where do we go from here, My Lord?”

“To the brooks, of course.”

“To the brooks? It’s still a bit far. The sun is gladly going down and

darkness might come upon us before we can return."

"You are right," he concurred. "So?" He made an O-shape with his mouth and bulged his eyes, making him look funny, but attractive. To her.

She traced her finger along the scars, and as she made to bring it down, he caught her hand in mid-air. He looked fiercely into her eyes, and she reciprocated. Then, he dropped the hand down and helped her down on the log."

"So, like I believe you know, I lost my mother during the delivery of Lady Beatrice." He said it like nothing happened a few seconds back.

She was flabbergasted by the torture he gave her and wondered if he did it on purpose or on impulse.

"Yes, she told me. How did you feel about her death?"

"Terrible! My Lady, terrible! I felt like I lost the real grip on life." He shook his head, pain written all over his face. "I could beat my chest and say that her death was the reason Father died too. It was visible on his face. His actions spoke the same. He became a shadow of himself, one of the reasons I said I would never get married to someone I love so much. Love is painful. Isn't it, My Lady?"

She reached for his left hand and squeezed it assuredly, the pain in his heart dissipating with each squeeze.

"Who, then, took care of baby Beatrice?" she asked, not knowing what to say afterwards.

"The maid I had before Rachel," he responded. She left her position shortly before Rachel arrived. Janet Hopkins was a trusted employee, and I was sorry to lose her, but she did quite well for herself by

marrying a merchant.

Isabel nodded.

“As for Rachel,” the Baron continued, “she was simply looking for a position, and as Janet had just left, I thought I’d see how she adapted. And I must say, she’s turned out to be a trustworthy member of staff. Now she oversees the other staff on the estate.”

Isabel nodded again. She felt for him for standing up for so long and urged him to sit beside her.

“No, my dear. You can see the log can’t contain us comfortably. Moreover, I love standing. It makes me feel like I’m protecting my lady sitting before me.”

She chuckled shyly. “So, tell me more about your parents.”

It was obvious he had carried baggage of pain in his heart for a very long time. Sharing his story with her helped to ease the pain away. She could feel it from his voice.

“My mum was a beautiful woman, just like my sister. She was tall and athletic, with an innocent face. She could barely hurt a fly. My father had a temper issue and could destroy things without feeling any remorse. But, she came into his life and calmed his nerves. She was a blessing to him.”

“I love such women. My mother’s carbon copy,” she appended.

He smiled, then said, “You could see the carcass her demise made out of my father. We became his only solace. Still, we were not enough for him. A few years later, he developed a deadly disease that left him bedridden, and he subsequently gave up the ghost.”

“Oh! What a painful and pitiful way to die!” she exclaimed.

“I was left to protect my sister and the estate alone. I was so young to be given such a great task to perform alone. At a point, I lost it, and the resultant effect was my sister’s poor health and this scar on my face.” He pointed at it. “I became dangerous, and that was the beginning of my rascality. I hated the life I am living. It doesn’t connote responsibility.”

“You are right, My Lord. But, that doesn’t mean that you are a total failure or that you can’t change.”

He ignored her, determined to pour out all the content of his heart and make it bare. He had developed weariness from the baggage of hurt he had carried for so many years.

“I hated going to church because I felt God disappointed my family and failed me. I hated Him with passion for being cruel towards us. If He liked us, why did He allow calamity to befall us?”

“Do not talk that way, My Lord. We all have had a fair share of life. No one can boast of a clean slate.”

He continued, “People are scared and wary of me. The only people willing to associate with me and who are my closest friends are gamblers and drunkards and men of questionable character. Sometimes, I became ashamed of myself and the life I live. But, how do I turn back the hand of time and clear off the negative mindsets people have about me and live an exemplary life?” he rhetorically stated.

“To be frank, My Lord. It is a mission impossible to turn back the hand of time; nevertheless, you still have enough time to make amends for

the previous life lived."

He felt something inexplicable towards her. Her demeanour was calm, assuring, and compassionate. Some of the words that had exited people's mind towards him.

She got up, traced the scar again, and asked him how he came about it. She had always wanted to know but lost the nerve to interrogate him. As the opportunity presented itself before her, she grabbed it with both hands. He exhaled heavily and declared, "It's a long story, My Lady."

"So long that I would not be let into the past of My Lord?"

"Not at all, My Lady. In that case, you may have to sit for long."

"As you wish, My Lord," she replied, caressing his beard gently and feeling the sturdiness. Finally, she sat back gently, giving him room to express himself.

"It happened shortly after the death of Father, during the London Season. I had accompanied my sister for her first London Season. Being carried away by the presence of beautiful girls and dancing with one during the ball caused me to lose track of Lady Beatrice. When I got my senses intact, I couldn't find her."

There was a long pause, then, he continued, "In my search for her, I went towards the back of the hall. A soldier was harassing a young girl. Without minding who he was, I bawled at him. He released his hold of her to find who was challenging him. Then, I found her. She was the unfortunate lady. I went berserk, not ready to know how she got there; though it was obvious he coerced her as a result of his authority. I slapped him twice subsequently. He charged at me, and we had it man to man. I gave him enough punches and tried to strangle him. When I almost snuffed the life out him, he drew his rapier in defense and got one good slash in before I could win the trophy."

“Where was your sister during the exchange?” Isabel threw at him.

“She saw everything that happened. It was such a great burden on her to see her beloved brother in a pool of his own blood in his defense of her. I guess she felt helpless and could not forgive herself for putting me in that condition. That, coupled with the demise of our parents, triggered her moodiness and subsequently having a nervous breakdown. I felt I had failed her for not being able to find solutions to her problem, part of the reasons I became what I have become today.”

He felt a heavyweight fall off his heart immediately he relayed his experience to her. That was the first time he had relayed his story to anyone since the incident took place. She tried her best to fight back the tears trying to escape from her eyes. He saw her struggles and said to her, “I’m glad you never judged me. Many people have done so, and no one associates with me, though I’ve learned to survive my own way.”

She was filled with compassion and empathy towards him. He knew. She was a different lady. He admired her poise and guts. He loved ladies with confidence. She loved men who had fought great emotional battles and still lived to tell the tale. That’s what bravery, to her, was all about. He was brave. And handsome. With a soft heart.

“Far be it from me that I would judge you! Your stories have a way of drawing me closer to you and wanting to know more about you. You are such a handsome soul with a beautiful heart. I think people need to stop judging others by their outward appearance. It dampens the spirit and kills the spirit of love. Better still, every saint was once a sinner, and every sinner has a future. I see you as a sinner turned saint. I want you to drop the lifestyle that paints you black in the sight of people and embrace a better living. You are a great eagle, keep soaring and stop feeding among the vultures. Eagles do not eat rotten meat; they love it fresh and clean! I believe in you. I believe in what you can become. I believe that one day, you will become a saint.” Her voice became quaky, and she managed to control her emotions.

He was touched too. He knew that he had found the real woman and was not going to let go of her. Love was an expensive commodity, and he had got his on a platter of gold. He looked deep into her eyes again, sending out passionate flames into them. Then, he held out his right hand for her. She put her left hand into it. Gently, he drew her up. She stood, her hand still into his, and with their eyes searching each other, he brought her closer to himself. She showed no sign of resistance, which encouraged him the more. He wrapped his arms around her, and she did likewise. It was their first embrace.

They stayed that way for a long time, finding solace in each other's body. She felt him down there, sturdy and rigid, and shuddered. It was the first time she was coming so close to a man's turgidity. His hands caressed her body and set every part of her aflame. He deliberately brushed his lips against her ears. She froze. No, melted.

He knew the impact of his actions on her and inwardly laughed raucously. He couldn't remember when last a woman melted in his arms. Yet he would not deny the fact that he felt the same. He brought his tongue to her face, ravishing every part, except her lips which were already trembling and luscious, waiting to be devoured. Then, slowly, but, gently, he released her. Eyes clicked. She looked down, weak and emotional. Night was quickly overshadowing the day. Sounds of different animals were heard with those of the crickets overtaking them all. He cleared his throat and said, "Let's go, My Lady."

It was a great relief to her. No, she longed for more but feared things could escalate out of control, and something drastic could happen. She knew that the only thing she needed that moment was him inside her and making her feel like a perfect woman; however, she loved decency and respect. No matter how weak she was, she would never love to be taken in the woods. She would prefer the soft bed on her back and moans escaping her mouth as she finally became the woman she dreamt to be.

They walked down the pathway, each scared of breaking the silence

between them. The stars glazed the sky and the moon smiled down at them, evidence that Mother Nature had made everything beautiful, even their meeting each other. As they neared the estate, there was an overwhelming feeling in their heads with a calm influence on their bodies and their hearts beating rhythmically for each other. It was love. The one made in heaven.

Chapter 18

Rachel was sitting on a little stool by the portico working on her nails. She had finished her duties for the day, except for the fact that the Baron hadn't returned. Duty and responsibility bestowed upon her to sleep last in the manor, whether the Baron returned early or not. Hers was the highest rank of servantage, and she had been devoted to her duties, an action Lord William always put into consideration and specially remunerated her once in a while. Despite that, Rachel seemed to always want to bite more than she could chew, or better still, bite the fingers that fed her. Not that anyone was aware of her hidden agenda. It was an act conceived in her heart, and she vowed to make it a reality, but she had to tread cautiously and subtly in order not to be an enemy of herself or the enemy stopping herself from getting to the next rank, an enviable position any lady would accept with open arms and a heart filled with gratitude. She had been plotting the plan for the past two years, and recently, it seemed like luck was shining on her and her vision getting clearer by the day.

As Rachel sat there, her countenance displayed that of a sad person. Something had been bothering her for the past few weeks, each day that passed by saw her character getting moodier and lacking cheerfulness. It grew worse because she felt she was closer to achieving her plans than before. Now, she had a great obstacle she must overcome if she must achieve her plans. She wasn't happy about that. It meant she had to increase the tempo and deploy other strategies to get through. The obstacle was Isabel; an innocent girl brought to the estate by fate. She had no business with the inhabitants of the Gregorian estate and never planned to until fate, through her brother's foolishness and negligence, landed her there. Now, she wasn't just there to focus on the business that brought her there; she had decided to take that which should be seen as a taboo. The worst part was that Isabel was effortlessly and stylishly having her way. And she was beautiful enough to get what she wanted. She had the right figure and well-curved at the right places. So many things willing the possibilities her way. Rachel hated her for that. Nay, for everything. She wasn't going to give her the chance to walk into the estate, grab that which she had spent the better part of her two years to nurse and walk away unhurt and her dignity intact; not as long as she, Rachel, was living and serving the Baron and his sister.

Beatrice that used to be fond of her if her mood was bright enough as to greet someone, no longer needed her services. She either confided in Isabel, or she did whatever she needed by herself. Now, even her clothing was being selected by Isabel. Rachel who had been her wardrobe mistress for almost a decade had been sent to the backdoor. She wasn't happy about that, though she could forgive Isabel for that. However, under no circumstances should she forgive her for trying to turn the Baron's attention towards herself. She knew how much effort she had put to get to the level she had reached.

Now, Rachel could go into her master's bedchamber at her own will and confidently too. She had learnt how to turn his drunken behaviour to her advantage. Just the previous night, he was drunk and was not able to recognise anything happening around him. It was a great opportunity for her, but her plots failed. However, she was not a complete failure; if she was able to kiss him deeply, and he reciprocated, she knew that she was making progress, no matter how little. That was the second time she had come so close to becoming his mistress. The first time was three months before...

The Baron staggered into the estate, drunk and disorderly, a condition he had constantly found himself in for so many years. The maid was already in the mood and waiting for his arrival. As soon as she saw him, she rushed towards him and helped him to his room. She helped him to clean up and get ready to sleep. Immediately that was over he climbed the bed. Before he could turn the other way and order her to put off the light, she swiftly, like a serpent, drew the strap of her gown at the back, and everything came crumbling at her feet. She bared everything for him to enjoy.

She stood there, facing him like Eos, the Greek seduction goddess. He was overwhelmed by the slender figure before him. Her eyes squinting and destructive. Her lips, luscious and inviting. Her breasts stood firm with her nipples hard and pointing towards him as if accusing him for not taking charge. He stared at her erotically, his eyes devouring everything with each stare.

He fought hard to look away, but the pressure to devour had blindfolded his sense of reasoning and responsibility. Then, he looked down, beholding the apple, clean and shaved and invitingly drawing him closer. She stood there, hands akimbo and enjoying the effect of the torture her presence was doing to him.

Slowly, but skillfully, she stepped out of her dress and boldly advanced towards him like an articulated seductress, making him sit up. She planted her lips on his, and he responded, devouring them like a hungry lion. His lips left her mouth to the nape of her neck, his right hand searching for her left breast.

Then, like one who had been released from the claws of the enemy, he stopped abruptly, pushed her away, and ordered her out of his room. He slammed the door behind her and laid back on the bed. Before his back landed on the bed, sleep had overtaken him, scarcely washing away the memory of what happened between them and leaving him with a vague idea of the scenario that played out.

... Rachel was so desperate to carry the Baron's bastard. There was no way she would leave the estate with all its wealth and glamour, and nothing was going to stop her from achieving her aim. Nothing! Not even Isabel. She knew how much he cherished family bond and would never love to father a bastard, which meant if she could get him to spill his seed inside her, there would be chances that he would make her not just his mistress, but his wife. And that would make her a Baroness, which was equivalent to rising from a nonentity to a noble lady. She smiled at the thought of the odds being in her favour and exclaimed to herself, "I am getting there!"

The smiles quickly evaporated, and her countenance changed to a sorrowful one. The clip in her hand suddenly fell off and dropped on her right foot. She winced as Isabel and the Baron walked into the estate looking like a perfect match.

The following night, the Baron was out again with his friends, drinking and gambling. It was another great opportunity for Rachel to carry out her plan. This time around, she had a great hope that he would comply and she would have her way. She sat at the patio waiting for lord William's arrival. It was almost past midnight, and he was not home yet. It was a normal thing, though.

Earlier on, Rachel had gone to visit a friend in a far place and had lost her way. It made her experience a stressful day, though she had managed to return early. Upon the discovery that her master had gone to the bar like before, she got her weapons of destruction together, ready to strike. That night, just as Rachel was about to doze off, she heard a sound from the stable. She became awake and alert. She heard footsteps advancing from the portico characterised by a staggering sound. It became louder and clearer. She was sure he was drunk again. She smiled to herself and rushed towards him to help him out.

"My Lord!" she screamed, holding him by the hand in a bid to steady him. She found him in a different physical state. His vestment was torn, like someone who wrestled with a wild animal. He tried to talk, but his voice was slurry and almost inaudible. A closer look revealed a broken lower lip and black right eye, evidence that he did more than gambling and drinking, he fought. She was not so much interested in whom he had an exchange of fist with. All her attention was to get him to comply with her that night and allow her to have peace of mind afterwards. She would not mind getting rid of him as long as the world knew that his seed was growing inside her, an outcome that would be decided upon how she played her cards that night. She was going to put all her feminine prowess to action just to achieve her aims.

"Step back, Rachel!" a voice spoke, snapping her out of her reverie. It was Isabel's. Rachel became so furious but had to obey unless she wanted to lose her job, or even her life as well. Hatred filled her heart against Isabel. She almost left the Baron to hit his head on the wall, save for Isabel's timely intervention. Perhaps, she had been awake all night waiting for the return of the same man, her target.

The Baron, upon hearing the voice of Isabel regained partial consciousness. He knew what awaited him. Just the other day, he was

seen resolving not to return to his old self. Now, he didn't just return to his vomit; he got himself into trouble. Rachel wanted to lend a helping hand to Isabel, but her master banished her from his presence.

"Obey her order and give way for her!" he thundered.

He still had a vague idea of what she had tried to do to him the other night, though he was not so sure. Nonetheless, she did not go too far. She felt Isabel looked so immature and unskilled to know how to tend to his wound.

The other servants emerged, helping Isabel to steady him on a chair.

"My Lord, I implore you, I am a better person to tend to your injury than My Lady," Rachel said from where she stood, close to the wall.

Isabel cast an angry look at her, then proceeded with what she was doing.

"Get me some alcohol!" Isabel ordered immediately. One of the servants rushed to get it.

"Get me an ointment and cotton wool!" she ordered Henry, another servant.

Isabel could recollect a certain time, during her adventure with the horses, how she fell off a speeding horse. It was a great fall. She incurred bruises and had a deep cut in her upper arm. Due to lack of proper treatment by the physician in charge, she almost lost her arm. As a result, she vowed to know how to treat little wounds and bruises, and since then, had been treating people with such a condition, herself inclusive.

As Rachel uttered the statement, Isabel laughed inwardly, trying hard to suppress it. She needed to be in charge and so had to do everything

within her jurisdiction to do so. She placed alcohol on a cotton bud and applied to the affected area. The Baron winced. She ignored him and proceeded to clean up the other areas. She applied an ointment on the wounds before leading him to his room. The servants cleared up the place and retired to their rooms, exhausted and weary.

Rachel was angry with Isabel for so many reasons. Isabel had made her mission impossible until further notice, of which the opportunity might not present itself again. She could see from the way Isabel cared for the Baron that both of them were in love. There was nothing much else she could do to stop them, except if another opportunity was to present itself on a platter of gold. All the servants were already aware, and they talked about it in hushed voices. Rachel wished seriously that she was the one being spoken about. Imagine her being the one ordering the servants around and giving them instructions as Isabel did. She would have been afloat with pride. She knew and understood what it meant to be the mistress or wife of a Baron and be addressed as 'the Baroness' or 'My Lady'. It would be such a great honour. But instead, she was losing everything to Isabel, and in the process, watching her plans crumble. She was not going to allow that. It was a battle she had started and had to fight to the end, even if someone should die at the end. She was going to shatter every wall of obstruction standing in her way. She watched as Isabel took the Baron to his room and felt a surge welling up in her throat. She quickly rushed to her room and fell on the bed, weeping her eyes out.

The Baron was ashamed of himself and his behaviour. He tried several times to avert Isabel's angry gaze. She was not happy with him at all, but she was not going to give up on him until she had satisfactorily seen a great improvement.

She stood before the Baron, hands akimbo as she scolded him. "I can't fathom how a man of noble origin should be involved in fighting like a rascal," she remonstrated, though her voice was not loud enough for someone outside the bedchamber to hear.

He kept quiet as she continued, "Just the other day, you were sober and resolved not to get involved in fighting or drinking or even gambling. Now, tell me, how do you give up on such a lifestyle when you keep going out there and meeting your friends?" As long as you

are seeing them, you must behave like them. It is a fact!"

Again, he was silent.

"I don't want to give up on you. However, I can't continue to tolerate this lifestyle. It's quite appalling and disgusting. It doesn't befit a man of noble identity. Probably, you are comfortable with this behaviour; I am not. Your sister is not. No one is. The earlier you advise yourself, the better for you," she concluded and put him to bed.

She sat beside him to make sure that he slept before she went to her own chamber to catch some sleep before dawn. Suddenly, she felt a palm caress her thighs. It was gentle and firm. She froze and became limp as she realised the direction the palm was coming from. Upon seeing her reaction and knowing the impact of his touch, he stood up and helped her to her feet. Then, he drew her closer, enough for her to feel the heat of his body and the sturdy frame down there. He caressed her thighs again with his right hand, while his left hand supported her body. She could feel his breath against hers and his mouth advancing slowly towards hers. Their eyes met and clicked. The heat of the passion took its toll on her as she parted her lips to receive his. He was not there yet. Inside her fresh flames burned rapidly. She lowered her guards as his face finally met hers, lips against lips. Breath against breath. He kissed her.

She whimpered and then, responded. Slowly. Then, with great rhythm and intensity. He reached for the buttons of her gown and ripped them off their roots. There was a great crumple; everything dropped down, covering her legs. She quickly stepped out of her clothes. His hands explored her body, and she responded with a soft moan, an assurance that she was in agreement with whatever he intended doing with her slender body. His mouth left hers, and he tasted her body with his lips, lingering on the two mounds of flesh on her chest. She responded with an intense moan. He was glad she reacted that way. He was a professional in the game and exploring and caressing her body was a higher level of professionalism. He needed her to enjoy every bit of it.

Just as the heat of the passion escalated and she laid down her guards completely, his hands strayed down her waist. She whimpered and wriggled out of his hold, leaving him a helpless loser.

“I can’t just do this!” she told him with a shake of her head.

“Why?” he demanded.

“Not as you remain a drunkard and gambler, fighting and getting into trouble. Your lifestyle disgusts me, William!” she blurted out, putting back her gown.

He couldn’t believe his eyes as he froze, watching her put the last bit of her gown on, covering the torn parts with her left hand. But what could he do? For the first time, she called him by his name. It sounded so good in her mouth instead of insulting, but not so good to bring him back from the shock. Still in awe about her action, he watched her walk away, taking a part of him with her.

He laid back on the bed, hissing intermittently while the sleep vanished from his eyes, leaving him to wander around in his mind and allowing his conscience to murder him. Just then, a servant walked into the bedchamber, causing him to pull himself together.

She slammed her door as she entered her room. That whore was taking her man and ruining her plans. That was supposed to be her; *she* was supposed to be the one the Baron longed for not her! Who the hell did she think she was? To waltz into their estate and steal his heart away within weeks!

It was obvious that she had cast a spell that had Lord William drooling over her like a stray dog; everyone had seen the way he doted after

her, even the servants had been talking about it. *She* was supposed to be the one they were talking about behind the shadows, not her.

She was so close to executing her plan that would free her from the clutches of helplessness.

She kept on hearing the sound of men laughing, drunk again, taking her back to the place she so badly did not want to be in.

“No! I am not helpless anymore!” she repeated to herself as her mind took her back to the little girl she swore she would never become again.

The sound of loud music filled the air alongside the smell of cigars and alcohol. She did not know how she ended up here at the tender age of fifteen, but life had never been fair to her. She was serving tables, in the demeaning piece of cloth. As she was passing, now and then she would get a smack on her half-exposed bottom, and whistles alongside catcalls.

She ignored them as those were the normal routine for prostitutes in the community. She had it worse than her counterparts, as she was more curvy and fuller in the right places than they were.

They always came forward to patronise her, and sometimes she partook when she realised the pay for the night was not going to be enough to fend for her bread and shelter that day.

“Hey, young missy, how ’bout we go a few rounds,” an old man that could have been her father called out holding a wad of money in his hands.

The offer was tempting, but she was still sore from last night’s client.

“I think I’ll pass sir,” she said, walking to serve wine on another table.

“Who the hell ya think ya are to refuse me?” he snapped smacking her bottom. The men in the room paid no mind to what was going on within the pub.

“Sir please, I cannot tonight, take another pick,” she said rubbing her sore bum and fighting back the tears.

“And I don’t want another pick you whore!” he said dragging her to the corner of the room.

“Let me go you bastard!” she screamed. “Let me go! Let go of me!”

He dropped her on one of the beds in one of the rooms, ripping off her underwear and ramming himself into her.

She screamed and struggled, but no one came to her aid.

“Whore! Who do you think you are to refuse me? You’re a nobody!” he spat flinging the money at her and walking out.

Her womanhood hurt, as it throbbed terribly. There was no one she could tell who would believe her; she was a whore after all, and a nobody. She was no man’s child or wife; she was just a piece of flesh that no man would want.

She had made an oath to herself after that – no one would ever make her feel like a whore again, and she was not going to die a nobody. She was going to make a name for herself no matter how hard it was for her.

She had quit the job and decided to be a servant in the house of a bachelor of noble blood. She stayed there for three months then started plotting. He had a fiancée who was in the way, and she had tried everything she could to separate them, but it did not work until she slipped poison into the food of the woman which eventually led to

her death.

Making the bachelor fall in love with her was quite easy, that was until he died by hanging himself. Apparently, his fiancée's death was not one his heart could handle.

She decided to change targets. She found a Lord of a good reputation and managed to lure him in with what she knew every man always wanted; sex.

She let him enjoy her body for as long as he wanted, yes and it was worth it until she saw him walk down the aisle with a different girl who was most definitely not in her plans.

She had once again felt the sting of rejection and her title as a whore had remained with her despite her struggle to let it go. The lady was all but an innocent bystander in the way, to kill her would have been pure wickedness, and she was not one to be unjust.

She set out to poison the Lord; in this case, she felt she was playing God, protecting the woman from a long spell of heartbreak and trauma. Of course men were nothing but vile creatures who wanted to dominate the earth and treat women the way they desired, she knew that it was always the woman who had the power to do and undo whatever they willed, with their wit and their bodies.

He was just the second victim of her many quests to become a noble. She travelled around from state to state within England after many failed attempts, that was until the Manchester incident where she was caught once, just once, with her special bottle just after the Lady of the house fell terribly ill.

They had come at her with pitchforks and torches, sending her straight to prison, forgetting that she was a woman who knew how to make a man grovel at her feet. They always wanted the same thing all of them; a woman's body.

That was how she managed to escape prison and run down to Lagos where she met Lord William, who had agreed to hire her since some of his servants had left.

A few days back...

Aunt Mariam had left a note with Richard, the chef, and taken a few of her belongings out of the estate. She got to the park where her lover, Silas, was waiting for her and together they left the county in a chartered cart. They found themselves in Sheffield, south Yorkshire where they settled and began a new life.

Silas was Aunt Mariam's childhood friend and lover. Theirs was made in heaven, it seemed. They had been secretly seeing each other and playing their love until it came to a point where they could not hide it anymore. Her family got to know about it and refused them from consummating their love. He was the son of a nobody, while Aunt Mariam was from a noble family. His parents were working for gentry and were paid a stipend at the end of the day. He grew up to join the family's business.

When her family insisted on her getting married to a man from a noble background, she refused vehemently. Her friend whom she grew up with, the mother of Isabel, tried to match-make her with her friend's son who was a knight, but she ran away a week to their wedding. She only returned a few years later after the gentleman had gone ahead to marry her bosom friend. She was about twenty years then. She and Silas had continued seeing each other secretly afterwards, especially during the London Season.

Then, on her twenty-fourth birthday, they decided to cement their love. Aunt Mariam had gone to meet him on their farm. Fortunately for them, his parents were out of town for an important get-together. They bought some drinks and pork, ate and drank to their satisfaction. After enjoying their little party in his room, they cuddled each other

on the bed with his hands doing wonders to her body. Afterwards, he had carnal knowledge of her and devoured her innocence.

Barely three months later, she noticed some unusual changes in her body. Her breasts hurt her at each touch, and they swelled a bit. It was then she remembered that her monthly flow was so light the previous two months and nothing came out the previous month at all. Furthermore, it was four days past the due time. She was not prepared for what was before her, but what would she do? She broke down in her room and shed uncontrollable tears, and her eyes became swollen. She almost cursed the day she allowed Silas to penetrate her. She remembered the unbearable pains she passed through that day but endured because of love. The tears flowed uncontrollably and consecutively for two days. She neither left her room nor ate any food.

Her friend, Isabel's mother, noticed that she had not left her room for two days and sent the maid to find out if she travelled without anyone's knowledge or she was just inside. The maid acquiesced, found out the door was locked from inside and gave her mistress the feedback.

Unaware of what was happening outside, Aunt Mariam decided to come out of her shell and face the world. First of all, she had to alert Silas; then, they would know the next plan of action. She would have to either terminate the pregnancy or face the world in shame. She was a faithful Catholic, who painstakingly obeyed all the doctrines. She was a member of the Marian movement and taught the younger ones to keep themselves. Now, she had mistakenly or purposely broken her own rules because of love. Would anyone take her seriously again?

All this was going on in her mind as she took her bath and applied pomade on her body. She brushed her hair and pinned it together towards the right side. She had to go and see Silas, and from their discussion, she would know what to do. She had doubts concerning the fetus, whether to terminate it or not. She would rather bear the shame and give birth to a bastard than to killing a fetus, a baby who would be glad to smile to the earth. She had heard of people dying from abortions and would not want to experience such horrible pain.

She could feel hunger, but the challenge before her was way tougher than hunger. She could eat later, probably, whenever she would be back home. As she unbolted the door and opened it, she collided with Isabel's mother whose right hand was almost knocking on the door.

Isabel's mother heaved a sigh of relief and asked her few questions, of which she answered hurriedly and scurried off.

She met Silas at the entrance of the farmhouse, resting his back at the wooden gate. It was in the evening. As soon as she saw him, she burst into tears. He held and consoled her, encouraging her to open up to him what the matter was. That was the second time he would see her after her twenty-fourth birthday.

"I am pregnant," she spoke amidst tears.

He looked both ways, ensuring that no one was nearby. Satisfied it was both of them alone, he took her to the bench close to the gate, and they reached a consensus.

Chapter 19

In Sheffield, South Yorkshire...

Aunt Mariam had settled down properly with her lover. The first two weeks were not easy for them. Adjustment and first pregnancy with no job at hand made it difficult for her to cope. She almost had a miscarriage, except for the grace of God that kept her. She did not forget to travel with her rosary. It was a part of her. She would wake up first thing in the morning and before she went to bed to pray to Mother Mary to help her to plead with Jesus Christ, her chaste son, on her behalf. She knew she did a shameful thing in the sight of God and needed His mercy the most, especially, now that the baby in her womb was growing and her tummy getting rounder each day that unfolded.

She remembered Isabel and George, her beloved. She felt bad for leaving them at a time they needed her the most. She knew her absence was going to affect them seriously, but also knew she had chosen a better option because a problem required urgent attention. She was going to think about them later and cry herself out.

They got to Sheffield in the evening and found themselves in the house of one of Silas' childhood friends, Roger Sander. He was stout looking with a tan skin colour, always jovial and ready to help anyone.

Previously, when Silas told his parents of his intentions to travel to Sheffield, he hid the part where he was going with Mariam from them. He knew that they would never be in support of running away with another man's daughter because they were men of high moral standard. Again, he never told them that she was carrying his child. They would have insisted that he properly married her, even though they would have scolded him for messing up another person's daughter, an abhorrent act. He packed a few items that he felt were important and together they left, never to return in the nearest future.

Over the next few weeks...

The Baron had a grip of himself. He knew he had gone overboard with his reckless lifestyle. Now, the precious jewel in his hand had fallen off, and it would take him a special effort to recover it. He made another resolution that he was not going to be found among the rascals again. Even though it was going to be a tough battle between good and evil, he was not going to allow evil to win the game. This time around, he was going to be on the side of the good, and together, they would conquer evil and soar to the next stage.

He became sober and tried his best not to step out of the estate again. He had everything he needed within. He had enough people he could interact with, and he could take a little liquor from the liquor shelf in his building. The next day, he managed to come out in the evening, ashamed to face Isabel.

He went to check on his sister in her bedchamber, and there he met Isabel having a hearty conversation with his sister. He nodded at them and sat on a chair facing them. His focus was more on Isabel than the sister. She noticed but said nothing. Isabel tried to conceal her feelings for him but was not smart enough.

“How are you doing today, sister?” Lord William asked his sister.

“I’m fine, My Lord,” she replied and asked him, “You have not been up since morning?”

“Not all! I decided to give myself solitary confinement and have a fine time with my thoughts alone.” He cast a glance at Isabel, and she reciprocated. He patted her upper hand and then excused himself.

“I guess it will be better to let the ladies be. I will take my leave now.”

“If you say so, My Lord,” his sister obliged.

“Where in God’s earth are you going to now?” Isabel asked, the first time she had opened her mouth since his entrance to the chambers.

“If you care to know, I just want to be at the patio door, just to receive fresh air.”

“Fine. Go in peace, My Lord,” she replied.

He was somewhat disappointed, for he thought she would love to keep him company there. Notwithstanding, he left the room to his destination.

A few minutes later, Isabel announced her exit to the astonishment of Lady Beatrice.

“What are you up to?” she asked her, suspecting she wanted to join her brother.

“Nowhere in particular, My Lady. I just need to walk around.”

“Fair enough. Take care of yourself and don’t forget to say goodnight before resting for the day.”

Isabel left, and Lady Beatrice chuckled at the tricky way she excused herself.

She took the stairs two at a time, and as soon as she landed on the last case, she met the butler carrying two glasses and a bottle of red wine down the hall. She suspected he was heading to wherever his master was. However, she was confused about the two glasses on the tray. Mayhaps, he had a visitor. She needed to find out herself. The butler greeted her, and she responded with a nod, tagging behind, but careful enough not to let him know her motives.

She finally got to the patio and found the Baron sitting all alone, looking out. She greeted him and pretended to be heading out, her buttocks brushing his right shoulder. He called her back to join him. She obliged; after all, that was her reason for coming down.

They talked in hushed tones, careful not to let anyone hear them out. But their sitting position betrayed them. No one who saw them would not believe that they were just casual people having a conversation. She rested her head on his body, sipping her wine gradually. He felt her body against his and wondered what it would feel like to be inside her. He brushed the thought aside and held her hand, squeezing it, and feeling relieved that she was no longer angry with him. He was determined to make her happy because her happiness was paramount to him, aside from his sister's welfare. Since giving up on gambling and rough life would make her feel happy, so would it be. He kissed her softly on the forehead, but not quick enough for Rachel not to get a glimpse of it. She had been lurking around, patiently waiting for Isabel to take a walk to wherever she initially had in mind to go. But it seemed luck wasn't ready to shine on her. Frustrated and angry, she stomped away, hatching her revenge in her mind.

Later on, Isabel felt tipsy, the effect of the wine. She needed to go to bed, though the only thing her body wanted was to lie beside Lord William, his body against hers and sleeping like a baby. On the other hand, he felt like exploring her body and eventually, having her under him, probably, spilling his fluid inside her and both of them travelling out of space and colliding in heaven at the same time. But, he wanted to take her at her own will. He didn't want to lead her on, though he knew how to make her long for him and have her scream his name in a special way.

"My Lord, I think it's time I went to bed," she said, breaking the silence.

"You made my evening a fine one. Have a great night's rest, My Lady," he said, patting her shoulders.

Isabel felt somewhat disappointed, for she had thought he might

escort her to her room. Nevertheless, she took her exit, feeling grateful. She didn't forget to check on Lady Beatrice and to wish her a great night's rest.

"My Lady, I'm off to bed," she told her.

"Would you not care to have a chit-chat with me before going to bed?" Lady Beatrice asked her, adjusting herself on the bed. The room was dark and one could barely see another.

"Not in this dark and cold room!" Isabel protested.

"I like it this way. But I will always cherish your point of view." She got up and placed the candle on the candle holder and lit it with a strike of the matchstick.

Isabel was resting on the door, and when the light grew, she walked in. She sat on the bed with her. Both remained silent for a while before Lady Beatrice spoke up.

"If you would not mind, I have a surprise for you."

"For me?" Isabel asked, wondering what the prank was all about.

"Yes for you!" Beatrice replied, smiling sheepishly. She reached for the pillow and raised it. A piece of parchment paper fell off, and she picked it up. Isabel watched as the paper landed on her right palm.

"Here, open it," Beatrice said, beaming with smiles.

She gradually rolled it out, and the first thing she saw was, *Dear angel without wings.*

She read through and could not imagine what her eyes beheld.

"... you awaken the little voice inside me and keep the fire burning in me.

I was dead to the world and no more did I see reasons to live. I only existed, waking up, sleeping, with nothing much to fill the gaps in between.

The abhorrence of nature and all its attachments, with their beauties and glories hidden from my beautiful eyes.

What else could have broken the little wall around me and help me to snap out of myself?

I sought refuge in my little world, contented with my life, waiting for the day I would go to the great beyond, to join my parents who have gone before me.

Each night I slept, I heard them speaking to me through the whispering oaks that I could do better than I was doing. They refused to let me cross the thin line between there and here.

I prayed to them to allow me in until one morning, Mother said to me,

"Daughter, your prayers have been answered!"

I leapt forth in joy and happiness, thinking I was about to join them.

Then, my brother came in and announced to me that he had brought a special friend for me. That I would like her.

I frowned and asked him if he felt I needed a friend.

He assured me that you were different from everyone around here.

I urged him to let you in.

You came in, and the first thing you did was to separate the drapes, and the room got illuminated.

I saw light pass through my eyes and darkness disappeared forever. It was then I remembered Mother telling me that my prayers had been answered.

My beautiful angel, you are the answer I longed for.

You are not just a friend; you are my sister. Nay, you are my angel without wings. I have come to embrace you with open arms.

You are welcome in my life.

Yours truly,

Me.

Isabel managed to read all, and the last sentence sent tears flowing from her eyes. She loved her. She was glad to be the angel without wings, even though she saw it as an exaggeration, for she was an ordinary mortal who had no form of wings.

She placed her hand over Beatrice's shoulders and felt the warmth of her body. She drew her closer and rested her head on her shoulder. She patted her head, and both of them remained in that condition, satisfied with the silence they shared.

She later took her exit and entered her room. As soon as she laid on the bed, she allowed the tears to flow freely through her eyes, causing

a pool to gather on her pillow. She remained in that position, allowing her mind to wander around and later, she was overwhelmed by the thought of love.

The Baron likewise wished his sister goodnight before eventually withdrawing to his bedchamber, feeling satisfied at the way things were flowing between him and Isabel. He was going to keep tormenting her with his presence, a promise he made to himself. Therefore, subsequent days saw him touching and squinting at her at any slightest opportunity. His cheerful disposition was evident to everyone in the estate. Though he was trying his best to please her as well as convince her that he had turned a new leaf, however, he was consciously fitting into the life expected of a gentleman.

A few days later…

Beatrice woke up in the morning so weak and tired. She didn't understand why. She felt her body against fever, but her body temperature was normal. She relaxed back in her bed, expecting Isabel to come and give her some body massage before helping her out of bed. She was used to her now and depended much on her for emotional support. Not that she was lazy or could not achieve any reasonable thing without her, but her presence meant enough to her. She had accepted her to be an elder sister, the one she could look up to, specifically, for the fact that she was more experienced than her.

She knew something was going on between her brother and Isabel, but overlooked it since it was not her business; after all, both of them were adults and knew what was best for them. Their actions the previous day were an evidentiary proof that both of them had a great passion and feeling towards each other. She was not going to come between them; neither was she going to stop them from achieving their goals and dreams. It was their own time to explore the possibility of becoming a pair. If they were fortunate enough for the odds to be in their favour, that would be so good. She was going to be happy for them and give them her full support. Deep within her, she knew that Isabel was the best lady for her brother, and she could see drastic

changes in her brother since the emergence of Isabel in their home. She never liked his lifestyle and wished he could change for good. Now, someone had come to help in bringing her wishes to pass. Her body ached as she turned to face the wall. She wondered why Isabel had not appeared in her room, at least to say good morning to her.

Isabel, on the other hand, had overslept and didn't see when the darkness of the night gave way to a bright and beautiful morning. She had slept very late, doing one thing common among the newly found lovers. She was awake all night thinking about the Baron. It was beyond the casual thoughts; she had sensual thoughts going on in her mind, and like most thoughts follow us to the gate of our dreams and eventually enter with us, she had the most erotic dreams that night.

The rays of the sun flashed through her eyes, and she snapped up from the bed, confused about her whereabouts. In her dream, she was right on the bed of Lord William, doing that thing common among lovers. It was not surprising as she woke up that she found herself in a different reality. It took her few seconds to snap fully back to the present. At least, she did snap back.

She rushed into the restroom to take care of herself, after which she returned to the room to arrange her bed. She hated the maids doing her personal things for her; she was not trained that way. Her mother brought her up in such a way that she could adapt to any environment without being an unnecessary burden to people.

"What if there is no maid on earth, would you not do your chores by yourself?" her mother would ask her.

She had taken much solace in that and had learnt how to do almost everything for herself, even to prepare her own meals. It was a great idea, and she would not hesitate to teach such a healthy culture to her children.

She finished arranging the bed and went for the broom to sweep her room. She finished putting everything in order and headed for the door. Opening it, Isabel stepped out, shutting it behind her.

She headed to Beatrice's room and just at the door, she met Rachel coming out. Her countenance was not friendly. Isabel greeted her, and she responded almost inaudibly, swayed her waist this way and that as she stepped onto the stairs. Isabel shook her head and smiled, watching her while she walked down the stairs and out of sight.

She knocked on Beatrice's door and went in, found her still on the bed and became shocked.

"My Lady, I greet you."

Beatrice gave a beaming smile, evidence that she had been waiting for her.

"You are not up yet?" she asked her.

"No, My Lady. My body aches."

"Oh, how awful. Have you cleaned up?"

Beatrice shook her head.

"But, the maid was here? I saw her leaving."

"Yes, My Lady. I didn't need her services. In order not to keep her waiting, I sent her away."

"Why did you do so?" It was then Isabel understood the reason for the maid's unfriendly action and shook her head.

"I don't think I like her anymore. Something in me tells me she is

evil."

"My Lady!" Isabel gasped. "It's just your mere imagination playing pranks on you. No one is evil here," she cautioned her lovingly. Afterwards, she helped Lady Beatrice up and encouraged her to do her toiletries. Then, she got an ointment from the shelf and gave her body a thorough massage, her fingers playing out magical roles on Beatrice's skin. She winced at each touch, her whole body feeling like someone whose body had been hit with a hammer or one who wrestled with the Devil. She tried her best to endure the pain for she knew that the outcome would be fantastic, and there was no pain reliever other than the massage therapy. After feeling Isabel's fingers leave her skin, she laid still on her bed as the feelings in her body returned, and with a spring in her step, she got out of bed and led Isabel to brunch.

Chapter 20

Beatrice went to bed feeling better than the way she embraced the morning. She had a great day and remained grateful to God for sending Isabel to her life. Isabel had once told her about her experience in massaging and resetting of bone, a skill she learnt after the fall from horse riding. She had since then helped a few chaps and young girls in getting their health back in order. Beatrice told her to take up health care as a profession. But she declined, contented with doing it as a sacrifice of love to people dear to her.

She loved her so much and wished they were more than friends. Several times she had wondered why it took Isabel so long to come into her life. Had she come earlier on, maybe, she would have regained her freedom from self-sabotage and destruction. Well, she was not totally destroyed. At least, she was regaining her self-worth and dignity. Now, she knew what it meant to pick up a quill pen, dip it inside an inkwell, and put something down on parchment. It felt so good to pour the imagination of her head on paper and read through it, just the way she did to other people's works of poetry and prose. She laid still and allowed her head to ruminate on different episodes of her life. From there, she drifted off to the dreamland and had a beautiful encounter with people in the other world.

Beatrice's eyes slowly parted as she regained full consciousness of her environment. She was on her bed. As she rolled over to face the large room, she felt untold pain. Her body was in a serious condition. It was double of what she felt the previous day. She wondered what could have been going on in her body. Her soul was filled with grief and sorrow. She did not like the condition in which she found herself. Worst of all, she had lost the voice with which she could cry. Cold chills passed through her body, and she felt goosebumps all over.

Beatrice could remember when she passed through such a condition. It was during the season of plums in July some years back, while her father was still alive. She had gone plum picking and ate so much that

she could barely breathe. She had come back with only a few in her basket and handed them over to her brother. She laid down on the bed to rest a little and to enable proper digestion of the fruit. That was the beginning of her body ache, and she ended up having a physician check her body, and drugs were administered to her for so many weeks before she could regain her good health again.

That was the last time that saw her going plum picking or even bringing it closer to her buccal cavity. She never wished to be in that condition again. Therefore, she tried to force herself out of bed but discovered how heavy it felt to achieve. She wanted to scream to attract people's attention; her voice was so faint that she could barely hear herself. She wished someone could come to her rescue but saw no one. She managed to force herself to sit up, pending when a maid or Isabel would enter the room and help her condition. As she sat there, resting her back on the frame of the bed, she began to regain her strength little by little, though with the speed of a snail.

A few minutes later,

She heard a knock on the door and knew immediately that it could be one of the maids because that was not Isabel's pattern of knocking. She invited whoever was at the door to enter. The door clicked open, and Rachel entered, bearing a tray containing a mug of tea and cake. She hissed silently and ordered her to drop it on the table at the centre of the room. Rachel curtsied as she was commanded. Then, she turned to Lady Beatrice, expecting to receive more instructions. Lady Beatrice, on the other hand, pretended not to notice her presence.

"What else, My Lady, would you have me do?" she asked Lady Beatrice.

"I do not think I would want you to do anything for me!" Lady Beatrice snapped at her. Then she felt a sharp pain in her stomach, although she tried hard to suppress it.

“Why, My Lady?” Rachel asked her in the most humble way she could.

“Do you ever care about me?” Lady Beatrice questioned her.

“I do, My Lady,” she responded with a curtsy.

“I doubt it! You got in here, saw me in this condition, and never cared to know what I’m passing through. Do you think that food over there is as important as my health? Anyway, if you think you care enough about me, fetch me Lady Isabel. I think I will appreciate her presence better.”

Rachel curtsied and left her presence. She returned with Isabel not long after.

Isabel gave her friend a warm embrace upon seeing her.

“My Lady, I want to believe that you had a great night because, from your facial expressions, you look otherwise?” Isabel addressed her as if teaching the maid the right way to treat the noble lady.

Beatrice, on seeing that the maid was still standing there ordered her out. As she opened the door to leave, Lady Beatrice added, “Never forget to remain inconspicuous in this chamber. I’m tired of beholding your disgusting face!” With that, Rachel walked away, but not forever as she was commanded.

“My Lady, you never answered my previous question?” Isabel requested.

“I’m sorry for not doing so, my dear. I just woke up worse than expected. My body aches, and I feel irritated over everything. What could the problem be?”

“I have no idea, my dear,” Isabel replied, sitting beside her and caressing her body like a mother.

“You seem to know the answer to all the questions in this world. Is it out of place to ask you why I’m feeling this way?”

“It is only God that has all the answers to the questions. I’m just a mere mortal, an instrument in the hand of the maker. I could sense that you need some massaging therapy. That, I will do immediately. Let me get some ointment from the first aid kit in the other room. I took it there the other day. I will be with you in a moment.”

She left, and while walking into the room, she met the Baronet the door, talking with Rachel. He quickly discharged Rachel and faced Isabel, eager to know what brought her to the room.

“My Lady, what if I may ask, could be the matter, for your countenance is dull?” Lord William implored.

“Nothing, My Lord. Lady Beatrice’s body aches, and I need to fetch the first aid kit to attend to her.”

“I believe she is in her chamber?”

“Yea, she is. Only that you can’t see her now, I will send for your presence at a convenient time.”

“If you say so,” he responded, giving way for her to get in. He made sure his body brushed hers, sending some electric signal to her body. She got what she needed and went back to Beatrice’s chamber.

Rachel went to the courtyard moodily. She refused to welcome the greetings from her fellow-servants. The butler and the stable boy were outside having a tête à tête with each other. She passed them and went towards the entrance of the estate. As she got to the entrance, the gatekeeper greeted her, but she cast a cursory look at him and ignored him. Finally, she turned her back and moved towards the courtyard. She found a little back chair close to the wall and sat down, head bent. She was close to shedding tears, but that was not going to be. Everyone was watching her, and she noticed all eyes on her. Feeling insecure and restive, she moved towards the back and found herself resting at the end of the building, sitting among the lilies.

That morning, Lord William received an impromptu letter from his friends in a faraway place, informing him of their desire to visit him since it had been ages since they last met. According to the letter, they were actually passing by his community to attend a social function somewhere and deemed it wise to visit him and probably catch up with old times. He was pleased to receive the letter for some reasons, one of which was the fact that it had been long since he set his eyes on them. Another one was that one of them happened to be a doctor. He was going to kill two birds with one stone by inviting him to check his sister's health condition and to ascertain the cause of her ailment. He had to let his household know about it so that they could get things prepared and put into place for the visit.

He first went to the kitchen to inform Mrs. Smith, the chef. She was preparing lunch for the entire household when he got in.

"I will have some guests coming to the house tomorrow," Lord William announced, after the exchange of greetings.

Mrs. Smith nodded and requested the number of people that he expected and the dishes that would be served. Mr. Jason, the butler, entered immediately and was told the same thing. Fifteen guests, nine males, and six females.

“Mr. Jason, tell the stable hand to make space enough to contain about ten horses,” he ordered the butler.

He excused himself from their presence and went straight to meet the gardener. She was shocked to see him, for he rarely visited the garden, except to show his guests around his estate, displaying his acquisitions and affluence.

“Miss Sanders!” he called out to her.

She stood up to receive the information he came with.

“I will be expecting guests tomorrow, and I’m likely to take them around the estate. Make sure to keep the garden in order. Get your father informed about the situation of things since he is out of town. If by any means he does not come back today, be diligent in your duty.”

“I have heard you, My Lord,” she replied.

He made to walk away, then changed his mind. As he turned back, he said to her, “One more thing!”

She stood up in obedience.

“This is your duty post. Remain here. You have no business with the chef or any other female here. I have noticed that you barely do your job these days. You are more interested in doing girly talk than focusing on the reason you came here. You are too young for that. Be warned!” His face was not friendly, a rare expression.

As he walked away, he met the maid on her way out of her hiding place. She looked grave and feigned ignorant of his presence. He cast a brief look at her and walked away to his sister’s bedchamber, where he learnt of the latest developments.

Isabel helped Beatrice to clean herself up and massaged her body. She screamed as Isabel's palms moved swiftly across her body. Her head hurt, and she had lost appetite. By the time Isabel was through with her, her whole body felt as though a hot liquid or peppery substance had been applied to it. Isabel helped her with her choice of dress to put on. It was a long, sleeveless dress, closely fitted to the torso just under the bust and falling loosely below. She needed it because of the weather. Summer was gradually approaching, and the weather was getting hotter than usual.

There was a knock on the door. And the second and third. Isabel went to open it for him. He got in, looking as sober as a judge. They stood there for some seconds, staring at each other. As soon as he beheld her beautiful face, his facial expression brightened up, and he smiled. Then, he greeted her. She made way for him to enter. He got in and greeted his sister as well. She was looking pale and sad. He didn't like it as it reminded him of her previous condition.

"If it persists by tomorrow, we will have to get a physician," he expressed.

"The same manner they were invited the previous times and were not able to diagnose my condition."

"Not as you think, My Lady. I will get more capable hands this time around. Your health is of utmost importance to us. I want the best for you," he said, examining her body.

Isabel stood there watching as both of them exchanged words, each not scared of the other's response.

He opened her eyes and peered in. They looked pale and dry. He could not fathom what could be wrong with her. He stood up, looked around the room as if it was his debut entrance to the room. Hands

akimbo, he faced Isabel, flames of fire flashing from his eyes. She returned the looks, melting with each stare. She felt like being wrapped up in his arms. But, no! Caution must be exercised because of the presence of Lady Beatrice.

“You look so worn out. I guess you didn’t have enough of the night?” he asked her.

“I did, My Lord,” she replied softly with a nod.

“Fine. I know you have not been informed that my friends will be coming to visit us tomorrow. The news just got to me this morning by the postman,” he announced to them.

Isabel nodded in approval, but not so with Beatrice.

“Tell me, which of your friends?” she asked him.

“From Hastings in Sussex county council. I met them when I was much younger. But now, most of them are married. They just want to visit us and to know how much our estate is worth. It will be an honour to see them after so many years.”

“That would be great. Shall I come to greet them?” the fatigued Beatrice asked.

“Of course, you can. Even Miss Montgomery is invited.” He flashed a smile at Isabel.

“Oh! That would be an honour, My Lord. Is there anything we can do to help out in preparations for their coming?”

“Oh, no! Everything has been taken care of. That is so kind of you.” He extended his hand towards her. She accepted it, and he held her a

little longer than necessary.

He lingered with the ladies, chatting about anything of interest, and he was glad his sister was able to respond positively. He felt a bit relieved before his exit.

Isabel stayed with Lady Beatrice throughout the day. When her condition deteriorated, she had to sleep over in her room, using the chair as her resting place. It was not an exciting experience; however, she preferred to keep vigil watching over Lady Beatrice than relaxing in her room.

Chapter 21

That night ...

Mr. Fredrick, the barkeeper at the tavern, stood at his doorpost, worried. It was past midnight, and all his customers were gone. Even the ladies of the night had retired to the inn with their respective customers. He was left with only his wife. His children were on the other side of the tavern, which they used as their home with the maid, and the shop assistant had gone to bed.

Mr. Fredrick was arranging the chairs and performing general arrangements for the next day because customers usually started trooping in as early as seven in the morning. The wife, a chubby, short woman, was arranging the kitchen and putting everything in order for easy accessibility. He had been on the lookout for one of his best customers, Lord William Gregory. It had been more than six weeks since he last set his eyes on him. Several of his customers had come to ask him about the man; contrarily, he could not supply any concrete answer as to why he'd quit coming.

He rested a chair on the round table which could contain four chairs at most. He was weak and weary from the day's work, and his body yearned seriously for the bed. However, he was used to going to bed by one and waking up by five for the next day's stress.

He lackadaisically pulled out one of the chairs, and sat upon it, placed his elbow on the table and covered his slightly bent forehead with his palms. His wife, noticing him from the kitchen, came out.

"Jolly, what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing, my dear."

"It cannot be nothing, and you stay this way. Would you not prefer

going to bed?"

"I'm contemplating doing that. However, I have something bothering me."

The wife placed her hand on his shoulder, looking him over. Then, she asked him what could be the problem.

"Do you remember our notorious customer known for fighting and maiming his victims?" he asked in low tone, even though no one was within earshot.

"Are you talking about Lord William Gregory?" The wife smiled.

He nodded.

"Who does not know him in this tavern? He has been scarce these days," she added.

"Exactly what I'm thinking about!" he remarked.

"Who knows what has happened to him? Could he have fought somewhere and been killed?" the wife asked.

"I fear for the worst, though. But I don't think someone could kill him. He is a very brave man."

The wife nodded.

"We really miss him. If only I knew his abode, I would have gone to know how he is faring."

“Now that you don’t know, can we go home now. Tomorrow we continue?” the wife cajoled him, placing a kiss on his forehead.

He got up and returned the kiss lightly on her lips as both of them walked home together, leaving the rest of the work till morning.

Chapter 22

The guests arrived at the estate before noon. They were ushered into the living room and welcomed by the Baron, who was visibly excited to meet his longtime friends. Of course, there were exchanges of hugs and handshakes. Then, an introduction of the guests and host. There were crackles of laughter, jubilations, and merry countenances. Thomas Moore's *The Last Rose of Summer* was playing in the background, entertaining the guests. Wines were served by the butler who was dedicated to his duty and made sure everyone got his or her orders. It was a grand reunion.

One of the guests was Mr Berkley, a medical professional who was one of the eggheads in the medical field. He was known both far and wide as a doctor who never lost any patient because of his vast knowledge of modern medicine. How happy Lord William was when he found out that his friend, Mr. Berkley, was among the guests. As the wise man that he was, he decided to kill two birds with one stone by informing him of his sister's health condition and asking him to prescribe medications suitable for her ailment.

As the drinks were going on, the Baron took Doctor Berkley aside and had a little discussion with him. The host looked a bit aggrieved, despite his composure. When they got back to the living room, he sent for his sister and her companion to come down and greet the guests, an offer they accepted wholeheartedly. Lady Beatrice managed to get up from the bed and hand in hand they walked down the stairs to the living room.

The Baron walked up to them at the entrance, held his sister by the hand, and announced, "Hello, everyone! If you could remember my sister, Lady Beatrice. She is the one standing beside me. And there, is her companion, Lady Isabel." He pointed towards Isabel gleefully.

There were rounds of applause and rejoicing. The ladies went around greeting the guests. The hall was filled with a mixture of laughter and fun. Everyone was so happy to be there. After a while, they all began to dance to the tune of *Ludwig Van Beethoven's* Rage Over A Lost

Penny. The guests paired themselves, and those without wives danced alone. Beatrice and Isabel opted to go back to their rooms but were held back by the Baron. He offered to dance with Isabel who accepted the offer, while Beatrice preferred to sit and watch.

After dancing for a few minutes, Lady Beatrice signaled to her brother to release Isabel so that they could go back. He obliged and escorted them upstairs. He held Isabel by the waist and led them upstairs with the sister leading the way. Isabel felt the heat of his body as he held her, her mind veering towards eroticism.

They got to the doorpost, and Beatrice pushed the door open, and they entered. He closed the door behind him and broke the silence.

“My Lady, I have spoken to Doctor Berkley concerning your health, and he would love to meet you and take a look at your body,” he said.

“What exactly did you tell him about me, My Lord?” she demanded, looking him straight in the eyes.

“My Lady, even though you try to brace up, you still look pale and worn out,” he said to her. Wrapping his arms around Isabel, he asked her, “Did you notice what I’m talking about?”

Isabel nodded, casting a friendly glance at Lady Beatrice.

Lady Beatrice felt defeated and obliged to his request. Her heart was beating faster than before, a sign of her being scared of the outcome of the visitation. Her body still ached and her eyes, dry, but she wanted to be as strong as she could be. She looked pleadingly at her brother as if begging him to help her condition.

He understood her and said, “Everything is going to be fine. We are all

doing it for your good. Can I leave now? The guests have somewhere they are heading to, a ball. I would like to let in the doctor now to release them early."

"You have my word, My Lord," Lady Beatrice replied.

The Baron disentangled from Isabel, hugged his sister, and headed downstairs.

Both ladies stared at each other, with Isabel feeling sympathetic about the situation. Lady Beatrice began to weep softly. Isabel felt compassion for her and reached out to her. She embraced her and assured her that all would be well. They were locked in each other's arms when the knock came on the door.

"The door is open," replied Isabel.

Both men came in. Doctor Berkley was tall, young, and handsome, his beard a bit shorter than that of the Baron. He greeted the ladies as they released their hold on each other. He requested that Lady Beatrice should sit down, of which she hesitantly did.

He took a thorough look at her and requested to the know the kind of food she was taking, the time of sleeping, how much she exercised her body by walking around the estate and other questions connected to her health. He was supplied with the answers as he asked them. He took a look at her again, focusing more on her eyes. He checked her fingers for blood levels and her joints for any clue. He couldn't see anything that pointed towards the solution to her condition.

She sat still, praying that the cause of the problem could be ascertained. Her body ached seriously, and she felt so weak and feeble. She cast a look at Isabel, and she nodded assuringly with a smile. She smiled back feebly and looked at her brother. He looked concerned and worried but smiled at her. Not knowing what to say, they held each other's gaze.

Instantly, they were interrupted by the doctor who announced regrettably that there was nothing he could see nor understand. The Baron felt defeated and disappointed about the whole thing. He stepped forward and looked at his sister himself. He found nothing, even though it looked odd as he, lacking any medical knowledge, did so.

The doctor further said that he would leave and return in a fortnight to determine her state of health. He assured them that all was, by all means, going to be well and instructed that aromatic vinegar should be given to her often as it contained some medicinal elements that could help to cure her ailment, in its worst state, and reduce the risk of it getting worse.

Everyone thanked him profusely for the job done and the solution he proffered. He took his leave, accompanied by his friend. They went downstairs and joined the other guests who were having their lunch. After that, the Baron took them around the estate, showing them his material acquisition. They were pleased with him and wished him well. One of them, Joey, teased him and asked him when he would get married and join the club. That triggered laughter because the irony of it was that Joey himself was not married yet. They talked about many things, their jobs, marriages, youthfulness, and other things. By past three, they mounted their horses and carriages and left, bidding the Baron a great day. He was also glad to have them to grace his house with their presence.

In the evening, he decided to go to the apothecary store to purchase the vinegar as requested. Not that he could not send any of his servants, but he wanted to do it by himself, a sign of how significant his sister was to him. He was not going to fold his arms and watch things go wrong again. He knew how much she meant to him and was never going to let her down. He left the estate with the instruction that everyone should focus on their duties.

The ladies, on the other hand, sat in the room and talked about many things. Isabel tried her best to cheer Lady Beatrice up with different amusing stories. She told her about her experience with the horses and how she used to watch the horses mate and bring forth a pony. She

also talked about her childhood fantasy of a husband. She wanted to marry a Knight and always acted in a polite manner whenever her father's friends who were knights graced their manor with their presence. She enjoyed following her father to the sporting arena where they performed some rehearsals on their different fighting skills. She was enthusiastic about, especially, the clashing of their swords and dodging skills.

Beatrice was filled with awe because hers was a direct opposite of Isabel's adventure. She hated Knights, especially their swords. She only loved to hide amongst the lilies and enjoyed their companies. They gave her comfort, while Knights gave her goosebumps and made her tremble with fear each time she set her eyes on them. She had unconsciously associated the identity of the Knights with the sword and felt that whoever fought with the sword was not a human being to be reckoned with.

However, one of the sets of people she adored were the nuns. She fell in love with their piousness and the way they walked with poise and elegance, clasping their hands with the rosary. They walked as though they never belonged to the earth, but were aliens sent to guard the people against evil. Another thing she loved about them was their voices. Whenever they sang at the abbey, it sounded like the host of heavens had come to dwell among the inhabitants of the earth. She tried to sing like them when she was young but lacked their kind of sonorous voices. She loved music but was unfortunate to learn while she was young because she always feared that she was not bestowed upon with a great voice by divinity.

She actually told Isabel all her childhood fantasies, and they laughed and cogitated over them. After spending the day in the company of each other, Isabel went to her room, thinking of what else she could do for Lady Beatrice for her health had become a concern to everyone in the manor house. However, she was glad the sickness did not withhold her from being loquacious.

Isabel, the companion to Lady Beatrice, sat on the armchair in her room. She just came in from Lady Beatrice's room, distraught and perturbed by the circumstances beyond their reach over Beatrice's state of health. Each day that passed by saw her condition deteriorating and looking hopeless. Doctor Berkely had repeated his visitation and after examining her condition could not arrive at any meaningful conclusion. That meant that no one could establish the cause of her sickness, determine the cure, and forestall its further occurrence. Initially, it was just fatigue and body aches. Then, she began to lose appetite and only ate when forced to eat. That was quite comprehensible because she was not known to be a voracious eater.

The one that called for greater attention was her incessant sleeping and coughing. Initially, they feared for the worst and negative thoughts crept into Isabel's mind. She prayed to God to show her mercy. For the first time since she became a companion to Lady Beatrice, she prayed her rosary and asked Mother Mary to come to the aid of Lady Beatrice whom she had taken as a sister she never had.

Isabel raised her head a little and rested it on the edge of the chair, thereby facing the roof of the house. She saw a spider spinning its web and going about its business as if the world revolved only around the world of the arachnids. She watched it for a long time and sighed. She knew that by the time Rachel came to clean up the room the next day, it would be resting in the wastebasket, the place prepared for erring spiders. She chuckled and intermittently realised herself, then, sighed loudly.

Isabel was supposed to meet Lady Beatrice at the room, as usual, but felt withdrawn for no reason, though it could be that she wanted her to rest and be left alone. She thought about the Baron. She had not seen much of him that day. He only came in the morning to check on his sister; then, she saw him going through the estate with his hands crossed at the back. She did not see him again. However, she felt he was not within the manor house because she didn't as much as hear his voice. She inhaled the air and expelled it, then yawned, a sign of tiredness and boredom.

Within a short while, she slept and woke up later when she heard a rap on the door. She went for the handle of the door, opened it, and beheld Rachel standing before her. She opened it enough to let her in. Rachel shook her head and mumbled something like 'never bother about that.' Then, she said, "The Baron asked me to call you, My Lady."

"I hope all is well?" asked Isabel.

"I think so, My Lady. He only sent me to you."

"Alright. Tell him that I am on my way."

Rachel left immediately. Isabel got up a few minutes later and left the room, heading downstairs. Not sure of where he was, she checked the living room and didn't find him, then she headed towards his room. Halfway, she heard him call her at the dining room.

"My Lady, look this way," he said, his voice a bit louder than normal.

"Alright, My Lord," she responded.

He was eating some fruit salad when she came to him. He told her to have a seat, and she grabbed one of the seats opposite him. He called out to Rachel, who was a short distance away from them. She responded and came to him, and he asked her to serve Isabel her own plate of fruit. She sized Isabel up and walked away without responding to her master's instruction.

Isabel, not surprised by her actions, laughed inwardly and concentrated on the Baron opposite her.

"You look so pale, were you asleep?" he asked her.

“Yes, I was. Though I had woken up when the maid came to fetch me,” she replied, removing imaginary dirt from her right eye.

“That’s right. How is Lady Beatrice faring?” he asked.

“She is faring well, My Lord. She is currently sleeping, that was the reason I left her alone,” she replied, not looking his way but focusing on a painting above his head. A way of averting his gaze.

“I felt you did well by resting, having watched over her both nights and days. You have been sleep deprived for some time now.”

The maid came in, dropped the tray containing a mixture of grapes, apples, pears, and plum. She released it forcefully on the table, a way of displaying her resentment towards Isabel. Then, she clumsily lifted the tray in front of the Baron, making distracting noises with it. No one responded to her as she walked away, swaying her buttocks.

“Sorry for the embarrassment,” the Baron apologised to Isabel.

“There is no problem, My Lord. I understand her perfectly well now,” she replied with a smile, displaying her beautiful set of dentition.

The Baron was pleased with how she comported herself in the face of the embarrassment. It made him feel more endeared to her. He cast a look at her as she forked a pear into her mouth. He watched her as she gracefully chewed and swallowed it. He really wanted to engage her in a discussion but was being so careful not to involve any talk that had to do with his sister. He just wanted to be with Isabel alone and have a great evening with her. From the look of things, Isabel had performed better than he expected, and he was really happy he’d got a perfect fit for his sister.

She looked up and saw him staring at her and smiled. She would have preferred him to talk to her, and maybe, they could discuss something important rather than have him look at her that way. It seemed he did

not want to talk that day but preferred to ravish her body with his eyes.

He smiled back at her and asked, “Will it be out of place to request to know what is going on in the heart of My Lady?”

She smiled again and said, “Before the heavens and the earth, my heart is as empty as space.”

“I am tempted to believe so; however, your countenance tells me otherwise,” he remarked.

She said nothing, instead, put a piece of grape into her mouth. She looked up, and their eyes met. Their eyes lingered and searched each other for what seemed an eternity before she looked away again.

“Have you fallen in love before, My Lady?” he asked her.

She shook her head and relaxed backwards.

“What about the balls, have you been to any before?” he asked again.

She nodded, then, said yes.

“How many times?”

“As many times as I can’t remember,” she replied.

“And no young man deemed you so beautiful as to woo you?”

“They did. However, I never went to any balls in search of a sweetheart. I went to dance and enjoy my youthful self,” she replied

boldly.

“And if I may ask, in whose company did you go?”

“I have female friends. We could actually go together, though we always deemed it necessary to go in the company of a chaperone. I love it when it is an all-girls’ evening.” She rolled her eyes.

He loved her guts and felt pleased to have come her way. Her boldness still mesmerised him, and he resolved in his mind that one day, he would slip his ring on her finger, a way of acquiring her completely and lawfully making her his.

She took the last fruit on her plate, gently placed the fork in the tray, and shifted it towards the right. She raised her head, clasped her hands, and looked towards the Baron. He was lost in his own thoughts. It was she who brought him out of his reverie.

“My Lord, you look lost. I hope nothing is wrong?” she asked soothingly.

He smiled and said, “Not at all. I just wanted to give you the chance to enjoy your dessert in peace.”

“If you say so. Now that I am done with it, may I take a leave?”

“If that is what you want, My Lady. You have been great company. I appreciate everything you have been doing for us,” he said to her.

She was pleased to hear him appreciate her. That was a sign of humility to her. It made her heart reach out to him the more, and she knew that she might not be able to resist him further if he happened to get hold of her. Not wanting to stay longer and cause more crisis to her head, she excused herself and went away, casting him a friendly smile.

He responded and bade her goodbye, joy overflowing his heart.

Chapter 23

Isabel went straight to Lady Beatrice's room, expecting a peaceful sleeping lady. But she found her vomiting in a plate close to the bed. Her heart reached out to the younger lady, and she tried to imagine the degree of pain she must have been undergoing. She moved closer and cradled her back as she vomited. A closer look showed her that the vomiting was mixed with blood. Isabel became weak to the marrow and was lost at what else should be done. She momentarily left Lady Beatrice and went downstairs to get water. She met the maid on the way and instructed her to go to the younger woman's bedchamber and take care of the mess. Subsequently, she got the water and followed the maid up immediately.

Directly after she got in, she handed Lady Beatrice the cup of water; she took a gulp to rinse her mouth and expelled the water into the plate she vomited in. She took another one and repeated the same thing. When she finished, she handed the cup back to Isabel and she dropped it on the table. Then, Isabel sat beside the ailing lady, while she placed her head on her lap.

Rachel cleaned up the mess quietly and left the room without any of them talking to one another. She banged the door hard behind and walked away.

The two ladies just maintained their position, neither talking to each other. They stayed that way for a while before Lady Beatrice spoke up.

"What about my brother? Have you seen him this evening?"

"Yes. As a matter-of-fact, I was with him before I came up," replied Isabel who felt a bit relieved that Lady Beatrice could talk.

"How is his countenance? Does he feel so bad about my condition?" she asked again.

Isabel caressed her upper arm and said, “Not really, My Lady. At least, he did not display such. He had a cheerful disposition and both of us talked and laughed.”

“You are certain he laughed?” Beatrice asked looking up to get a clue from Isabel.

She smiled and said yes.

“I have been worried about him. I’m so sure he has not got as much as a full night of sleep,” Lady Beatrice said.

“Why do you feel so, My Lady?” an astonished Isabel asked her.

“My spirit tells me so. I could feel it each night. Furthermore, he looks so haggard and anxious these days. It saddens my heart,” Lady Beatrice responded sorrowfully.

“Not at all, My Lady. I feel it is just your mind playing pranks on you. He is very much in a good mood. It might gladden your spirit to know that he was the one who sent for me,” said Isabel.

“And that is because he needed a companion. Certainly, he needed someone to talk to. Thank goodness, you are here to cheer him up. I commend you for that. I know my brother very well. In as much as he looks so fiery and cruel, beneath the disposition is a heart as soft as a butter. He feels pain more than I do.”

Isabel could only nod, not knowing what to say.

“Do you know that my brother cries sometimes?” she asked Isabel who shook her head and was awed by that great revelation.

“Yes, he does cry. One of those times before you came, I mistakenly caught him crying by his bedside. I certainly knew that I was the cause of the shedding of tears. It made me leave his room and never to go there again. The memory could not leave my head. It haunted me for days and nights. I always knew he loved me. But it was a totally different ballgame to reciprocate, owing to my condition and ignorance. The only thing I long for now, above all things, is to be in good health and quit troubling his spirit. It pains me so much that I can’t do anything about my condition and free people who love me so much.” Her voice became quaky as she made the last statement.

Isabel held her closer and caressed her body, not wanting to let her continue, at the same time, feeling that allowing her to express herself would help her to heal emotionally.

Lady Beatrice continued, “I feel so bad that I have held people in bondage because of my condition. Look at you, you are as good as being under a house arrest because you can’t go anywhere again unless I can.”

“But, I did not complain, My Lady. I love you, and I enjoy your company,” Isabel interrupted her.

“Yes, you are right. However, you were not meant to even be here. Look at how I changed your fate and subsequently stole your freedom of movement. You love freedom and independence; I’m certain about that. But, I have denied you of that which means so much to you,” Lady Beatrice lamented.

“In as much as you are right, you are also wrong. One of life’s numerous lessons is to sacrifice some pleasure on the altar of love. Whatever I did for you and your brother, I did for love. Both of you mean a lot to me, and I’m glad I’m here with you. Even so, my brother’s carelessness brought me here, true or false?” Isabel proactively defended.

“I believe you, my sister. I just want you to make a promise to me. Will you?”

“Yes, I will. As long as your happiness and joy are guaranteed,” replied Isabel.

“Alright. Just promise not to leave my side, no matter what. You give me hope to live. I find solace in your company,” Lady Beatrice implored.

“I promise you, My Lady. Remember, we are sisters now. So, I’m here for you, my darling sister,” Isabel replied, poking her gently in the ribs.

Lady Beatrice laughed heartily as Isabel kept poking her. Afterwards, she felt relieved and thanked God for the angel without wings whom He sent her way.

That night...

Lord William sat on his bed, faced downwards with his palms cupping his face. No one needed a soothsayer to know that he was distraught and saddened in the spirit. He was worried about his sister and had spent so much trying to get her back to her feet. His major problem was the fact that the cause of the sickness still remained in the dark and unascertained. He knew he was capable of doing anything that would help her to recover from the ailment, even if it meant selling the estate. He had tried out every recommended drug by the physician that could cure the disease, all to no avail. He was tempted to believe that his sister was suffering from a curse, but the questions remained, who cursed her and why would she be cursed? He brushed the thought aside and sat up, focusing his gaze on the wall opposite him.

He remained in that position for some minutes, laid down on the bed and turned to the other side. Evidence that he was restless. He was a bit tired after the day’s activities, though he did not do much work on

that day. He only went round the estate to make sure things were in order as he usually did once in a while. After that, he went to the neighborhood to attend the burial of a close friend's sibling. When he came back, he requested that some fruit salad be prepared for him. He totally lost appetite and could only eat the fruit salad throughout the day. Each time he tried to eat something, the picture of his feeble sister lying on the bed filtered into his mind. She was his only closest family member and his responsibility as well. And the fact that she was a lady required that he should give her undivided attention and make sure she was always in a good condition. He knew that he was trying his best, however, his best was not enough as long as it was not bringing in a good and desirable result. He was a result-oriented personality; there was no doubt about it.

He sighed softly and wiped his face with the back of his hand. He turned his palm and looked at it critically, not that he was expecting to see anything anyway. Just a way of distracting his mind from thinking a lot. He sighed again and brought down his hand, yawned, and sat up.

"If I could as much as get a remedy for her illness, I know I have done the best for her," he muttered to himself.

Then, he disheveled his hair with both hands and yawned again. He was tired of being in that room and needed to go to somewhere where his mind could be free. However, it was night. Silence had overwhelmed the estate, and everyone must be sleeping soundly in their rooms, except, probably, for the staff who usually kept vigil to protect the environment. He thought of going to his sister's room to check on her. He felt he'd abandoned her after seeing her only once that day. Nevertheless, he had his reservations which could be based upon the fact that he did not want her to see how broken he was over her situation. Probably, his conscience felt guilty over that.

He paced his room for what looked like an hour; then, reached a conclusion on what to do, wore his upper vestment, and headed towards the door. Self-pity was never good for a man.

Worry was never something she would advise to anyone, yet that was what she was doing at the moment. Hope was almost a distant mirage

in Lady Beatrice's situation. Her heart was greatly troubled for her newly found sister. The girl had so much life ahead of her, and the uncertainty of this strange disease did nothing to soothe her fears.

Had Beatrice not insisted she sleep in her chambers tonight and get a proper night rest, she would have willingly slept in hers; she was starting to get used to the chair she used as her bed already.

The memory of her pale skin remained in her mind as she counted the beads of the rosary in her hand.

"Oh blessed Mother! Intercede on her behalf." She prayed trying her best to remain strong for them. She could barely remember how many times she had prayed but she knew that was all she could do.

She walked to her wardrobe and changed into her nightdress while humming a hymn to herself. She thought about Lord William; it had been a while since she last saw him. He barely came out of his chambers for the past few days. She did not understand why he would decide to lock himself up and not come down, but it too was part of the reasons she was in distress. She worried about him, even though it may not have been her place to. Maybe that was how he could deal with the situation; after all, every person had their own way of dealing with grief. She made a note to herself to check up on him at dawn; right now she needed to gather her strength for the next day.

She was just about to climb into her bed when she heard a knock on the door, then a second and a third; it was the Baron. What could he be doing her at this ungodly hour of the day?

"I'm coming!" she said walking to the door. "Good evening My Lord," she greeted when she opened the door. He was certainly not taking care of himself; she could see from his eyes that sleep had not been in his agenda while he was in hiding. He gave a small smile that made her heart leap; despite the obvious tiredness in his face, his presence

still made her excited.

“Good evening, My Lady, I trust you are faring well?” he greeted. A few days without seeing her face suddenly felt like an eternity; how he longed to run his hands through her hair.

“Why yes, and you?”

“I have been okay…”He walked into the room without thinking. “That’s a lie, I have been gravely distressed, My Lady, I cannot but feel helpless in this situation. She was just recovering, and now her relapse troubles me.”

“I understand, My Lord, she gets paler by the day, and no one can do anything about this strange illness. We can only pray and hope on the Lord to heal her.”

“God hates us,” he scoffed. “Otherwise, this calamity would not have befallen us again.”

“Trails and temptations come and go, but His love will forever remain,” she said, placing a hand on his shoulder. She was not sure why, the physical contact gave her a little amount of comfort.

He turned to face her, and holding her hands in his, he brushed his lips against them. “Thank you, no matter what happens, I will forever be grateful you walked into our lives.”

“As will I, My Lord.” His eyes held hers spellbound to his, for a minute time ceased to exist.

Before thought could come into play, his lips met hers in one hasty move. Her senses stopped functioning; all she could think of was the feel of his lips against hers.

His hands ran down her waist, tracing the outline of her slender figure. Her skin burned beneath the thin fabric that separated his fingers from her skin.

Her lips were soft and sweet on his, his tongue parted her ever-open lips, and her gasp of surprise sent fire to his loins.

She tossed her head back, allowing him to explore her skin with his lips.

She let out a moan, and when his hand traced the outline of her bosom, a smile ran up his lips at the sight of her face. He was surely just beginning. With his hands still running over her slender shape … *damn what a body* …he thought, and with that he deepened the kiss like it was his last, while she ran her hands over his manly figure … Oh, she wanted him now …He picked her up, making sure he took charge of this very moment. Hearts beating, lips smacking …oh, what a moment and not any chance to spare …with him silently hoping for no distractions …he loosened the ribbon binding the dress together, and pushed the fabric down her skin, as his lips ran down her shoulders.

“This… My Lord… I suppose we should retire…” she managed to gasp through laboured breathing from the overwhelming pleasure.

“Is that so?” He took her left breast in his hand and gasped at how soft it felt. He took his time to feel the soft skin, kneading and massaging gently, and watching her nipples harden at every move…still playing with them, she let out a deep moan.

“Oh!” the moan rolled off her lips. It was getting hot …she felt

something poking her below her waist. She let her hands fall and “My heavens!” she gasped, eyes widening in shock and pleasure at the sight of his manhood. She had read about the phallus of a man, but she had never touched or seen one, and she was certain this one was a sight to behold.

Her cheeks reddened as she took it in her hands

What a warm creature; it resembled that of a mighty stallion she thought, and the pleasure of him sucking on her nipples brought her mind back into reality as his tongue grazed her flesh and his groans of pleasure could be heard.

Her moans got louder, and with every passing second, she felt something she had never experienced. Something she couldn’t describe coming from inside her. She bit her lips as she felt herself reaching the peak of her pleasure. Her moans turned to screams of awe, his lips met hers, leaving her swollen bosom satisfied.

She fell down on the floor unable to move, her body shaken from the overwhelming sensation of lust. Her thighs glistened from the warm liquid that dripped down from the juncture of her thighs. Words could not do justice in describing the euphoria of climaxing; it was frightening, and the most pleasurable thing she had felt in her life.

She could not quite gather her thoughts correctly as her brain felt rather fuzzy and light-headed.

His voice brought her back to reality; the only thing she was certain of was that this was only beginning, and she felt the night getting more and more exciting.

Getting back on her feet, he took in the full sight of her, her skin glistening beneath the candlelight as her red locks framed her face; if no one had seen Eve, he had tonight.

His shaft threatened to burst as he got hold of her, lifting her and laying her on the bed. He felt the heat within the soft molds of her womanhood, such beauty so heavenly he could not comprehend. She got hold of his manly beast and started to rub on it in desperation from the hands of lust. Her lack of experience was evident in every stroke, but it still pleasured him. He positioned himself on top of her with her legs spread apart, and his shaft rubbed her walls as if seeking permission and realising this was her first time, contrary to what he believed.

“Do you want me to go on Isabel?” he muttered to her, wanting this to be completely mutual between both of them.

“Yes, William,” she gasped, “make me a woman. I need to feel like a woman.” She was certain she wanted it at this moment, with him, and no one else.

Lubricating his shaft he set in slowly and easy, checking her face to see how badly it hurt.

Her mouth opened agape as his fullness sank inside her. A groan made its way out of her mouth as he began thrusting in and out of her.

A small smile of satisfaction danced across his lips as he took in her face of pleasure; it would be a sight he could not forget in a long time.

He came out and then in a split second thrusted in; she gasped, her eyes open to the fullest, and heart beating faster, she bit down on her lips and let out a deep moan as he repeated the same thing, increasing his tempo. Sounds of slurping could be heard as he kept penetrating her, his mouth was agape but not a sound departed from it, just the slurping sound of his shaft hitting the very wet door of her femininity. He groaned at her tightness, never wanting this to end, and praying he did not reach the peak early.

She had never felt such desire for a man as she did now; he slowed down his pace, allowing both of then to savour the moment of their

copulation.

She felt her senses depart when he increased his pace again, diving in faster and harder, as she reach the climax of her climb, more intensely than her first time. Her body shook as her liquids ran down her thighs.

She pulled him closer, kissing him one more time and taking in his taste. He fell on the bed beside her, as they gazed into each other's eyes. They both wanted more, and as if they read each other's mind like an open book, they laughed at the thought.

"You, my darling Isabel, are quite exquisite," he whispered to her hazily.

Her face reddened at the compliment, and uncertain of what to do, she covered her face with her hands.

He kissed them with a laugh and gathered her in his arms as they both surrendered to the soothing arms of sleep.

Chapter 24

She woke up the next morning, turning to feel him beside her, but he was gone. A slight pang of hurt crossed her chest, that was until she saw the note on his pillow.

It read:

My darling Isabel,

I did not want to wake you from your slumber, hence the reason for my early departure.

On another note, you look quite exquisite while sleeping.

Love William.

Heat rose up her cheeks as she read the note. The Lord was truly thoughtful. The butterflies danced in her stomach as the day already seemed to brighten up for her.

Isabel prepared her bath, still very much sore from the night's experience. She took her time allowing the warm water to soothe her newly deflowered folds. She hummed to herself as she dressed up for the day, with high hopes for Lady Beatrice's recovery.

She stepped out of her room and noticed the tension in the air. Her instincts immediately sent her running towards Lady Beatrice's room. She muttered a word of prayer to God that the worst had not happened.

She opened the door to see the Baron sitting on the chair next to his sister's bed; he had already donned on his coat and brown clothing, and his hair was combed neatly to the back, a sight she could moan at, except with his countenance; he was battling the urge to cry.

The Lady's body was extremely pale, and the stillness made her assume the worst had happened.

"Oh Beatrice!" Isabel exclaimed running to her side, trying to shake her awake and feel her temperature. Despite the disturbance and Isabel's wailings, the girl didn't stir or wake up.

She didn't want to believe it; unconsciously her fingers held her wrist to check for a pulse.

"She is still breathing, thank heavens!" she exclaimed with tears already flowing down her eyes.

Life without Beatrice had already become a distant mirage; she was not sure how she could bear the pain of losing another loved one in so short a time. Her parents, who meant everything in the world to her had already departed not too long ago; would the cold hands of death not leave her alone for once? Could mercy not pass her the gates of her heart and spare the ones she loved? The questions ran through her head as she forced herself to think positive thoughts more and more.

The Baron did not trust his legs to stand up and walk out of the room for air despite how badly he knew he needed it. He ran his hands through his hair, gripping it with much fury and pain. His red-rimmed eyes released the tears he had been holding back. The relief they brought was nothing compared to the grief that came with seeing his beloved sister in this condition.

Her relapse had never gotten to this stage; she had never battled it for this long. His beloved younger sister lay on the bed fighting for her life, and he prayed to a God he had grown to believe despised him for

mercy on the innocent soul. It should have been him, not her. She had so much life left in her; she was barely a woman and the prospect of her going to join his parents shook him to the bones; tears ran down his eyes as he bowed his head at the thought of being more alone in this world. Would his parents not look down from the heavens and roll in their graves at his helplessness?

He wiped his tears with the back of his hands and walked to his chambers. A mix of anger and pain held his chest; he found a bottle of wine and poured it into a cup with shaky hands, and letting out a growl he flung the bottle at the wall, as well as the cup. The sound of the metal hitting the wall did little to bring him relief as he picked up anything he found on his desk and flung it across his room.

He flung the papers across the room, and the bed linens, hoping it would give him some sort of relief as the shards of glass did when colliding with the hard wall.

A knock on the door interrupted his actions.

“Come in,” he managed to say with a shaky voice.

“My Lord,” Rachel greeted, then stepped inside the room.

“What is it? Is there any news about my sister?” he asked expectantly, wiping his tears and running his fingers through his hair for some sort of composure.

“No, My Lord, I’m afraid her condition remains the same as it was when you left the room.”

“So what do you want?” he snapped.

“Nothing, My Lord. I came to extend my condolences. Lady Beatrice has always been a wonderful soul; I hope she recovers soon.”

“Thank you; I hope so too.”

“I have been thinking about this occurrence recently.” She started, making sure the door was shut behind them. “This cannot have happened without any cause.”

“However do you mean? My sister has been sick for years and her condition got worse.”

“I mean, Lady Beatrice has never had this type of illness before, and a condition such as this one could not have happened without a change in something or a particular someone who may not wish your sister well.”

“You think someone under this household wishes my sister ill?”

“It’s a thought, My Lord; maybe such hatred drove such a person to try to kill her by poisoning her.”

“Would you not be the one in charge of my sister’s meals? How could such have happened?”

“For the past few weeks, Lady Beatrice has not been allowing me to handle her meals; it has been her new friend that has been taking care of such, which is why she might be the only cause of such calamity.”

“I do not believe this ma’am; Isabel would never do such a thing. She loves my sister as her own.”

His defensiveness about her made her stomach churn and the hate for

her rose; nevertheless, the seed of doubt would be planted, and that would be enough to cause a fight between them allowing her plan to fall into place.

“It’s just a suspicion, My Lord, not everyone wishes you well.”

“Enough! I would hear no more of this again, is that clear?”he snapped at her. The image of the Isabel he had come to love was very different from what she painted, yet he could not doubt the possibility of it being true.

“Yes My Lord,” she said then left the room, hiding the small smile that would creep up her face at the victory she knew she had gained.

William felt he could trust Rachel, as she had been with them for over five years, but he wasn’t sure. He didn’t know what to think at the moment.

He thought to himself about the many opportunities Isabel had to poison his sister; logically she had every opportunity from the day she started talking to Beatrice. Her motive could have been revenge for her brother, but that did not make sense either, they had buried the hatchet earlier, had they not?

It would not have been the first time people had betrayed him or tried to take advantage of his emotions and kind heart. For this very reason he made sure to establish himself as a beast before men and keep that shield up for as long as possible; until she came. She scattered his walls and left him in a puddle of need; he had never been so vulnerable around anyone before her, and he feared falling in love with her clouded his judgement.

Love, he had fallen in love with her. That was what had happened despite this dreadful situation, and he was certain that was the only thing pushing him forward. He had to be sure this was a lie; his heart wouldn't bear such grief if it were true.

Isabel gasped as the Baron stormed into the room, his breathing was laboured, and his eyes a mix of hurt and confusion.

"My Lord …"

"Did you do this?" he snapped.

"I'm afraid I do not understand," she said with the shock on her face.

"Did you poison my sister?" he asked, anger and pain rising his throat, someone needed to be held responsible for this dilemma.

"Lord William, did you hit your head? Are you sure you are alright?" she asked in disbelief. There had to be a reason why he would even think such for a split second.

"I am perfectly fine, Miss Montgomery, now I demand an answer."

"How dare you accuse me of such? Lady Beatrice is like a sister to me, and I could never hurt even a strand of her hair," she replied, the hurt registering on her face. "Do you think so vile of me, William?

That I would inflict such harm on someone, let alone a friend?" The tears ran down her cheeks as she used a hand to wipe it away violently.

"That was …"The sound of his name in her mouth cut through him like a knife.

"No, that's exactly what you think, you think me so wicked that I would watch a sister suffer and die slowly. I would have thought we were more than this, that you would trust me even in the slightest bit. I would do anything in my power to protect her, and you have the audacity to blame me for such a wicked …"

He pulled her against himself and let his mouth dominate hers. This woman was driving him insane; his desperate need to confirm what he already knew pushed him to question her, and with her in his arms, he needed no other confirmation. At least with her in his arms, he had some sense of control, even if it was just the way he kissed her.

"Isabel, you have succeeded in driving me crazy, in making my heart beat for you only." He kissed her again. "I can barely think around you anymore."

"Will …" He caught her lips again.

"Don't string me along; don't play with my heart." His lips went down to her neck. "You have won; you have me wrapped around your fingers," he mumbled. Her scent was doing nothing to stop the explosions in his head.

"My Lord," he said as the realisation of where she was came to her. "Lady Beatrice is here," she finished, pulling away from him.

He cursed under his breath, remembering the incident that caused both of them scars, his more prominent than hers. How could he be so careless and unthoughtful?

“My dearest, I apologise, for everything. For accusing you of such a vile act, and acting without thinking again,” he said, dropping to his knees and hugging her thighs.

He mumbled a long trail of words pleading for her forgiveness for his impulsive behaviour.

“My Lord, please rise, I cannot stand to see you like this,” she said, overwhelmed by the mix of emotions he had put on within the short period. His sister’s condition combined with whatever relationship he was building with her would surely give a man like him a huge blow and unbalance while trying to comprehend whatever it was he was feeling.

She helped him rise to his feet, their gaze remaining on each other’s without wavering. She lifted a hand to his cheek caressing it to comfort him.

“Oh Lord William, if only you could comprehend how much love this heart of mine has for you and Lady Beatrice. I would never do anything that would hurt either one of you.”

“I know that now my love,” he said, letting his lips brush against her palm.

Rachel stood by the door, peeping through the keyhole and overhearing the conversation between the Baron and the lady that ruined her plans. How could the Baron be so gullible by that woman? Why not her? That was supposed to be her; she was supposed to be the one the Baron confessed his undying love to. She had been with

him for years, tended to his wounds, been there to help him when he was unwell, and this lady had come to steal him away from her. She was not going to give up without a fight.

"Think Rachel, think," she mumbled to herself. She needed to act fast; soon the Baron would be blind to whatever it was that she said or did. She would become more invisible that she was before because of this woman that stood there.

It was time to pull out her trump card; it was bound to work and cause a commotion.

Without caution, she pushed the door open and walked in, clearing her throat for their attention.

"My Lord, I have great news! I'm afraid I cannot hide this any longer," she said completely ignoring Isabel's presence.

Lord William furrowed his brows wondering what announcement she would have to make this time.

"What might that be?" he asked.

"I am pregnant with your child."

"That's impossible!" he scoffed.

"Oh My Lord, it is not. Have you forgotten that glorious night when you came home in an almost drunken state and made love to me? Why I have not been with another man since then, so the baby could only be yours," she countered.

“That’s impossible! It never …” He scratched his head in confusion, having a vague memory of him kissing Rachel.

“I’m afraid it’s true, My Lord, we’re going to have a child,” she said with glee.

Isabel looked back and forth between the two of them; her head felt light at the news. She could see their lips moving in slow motion, but she could not hear them anymore. The thought of the Baron that she had given her heart to with another woman was too much for her to bear; she knew he was wrong for her, but she had been one of the Baron’s conquests. She could feel her legs give way beneath her as her body crumpled to the ground as her world did with the news.

“Isabel!” the Baron screamed, seeing her on the floor. “Get out! Get out of the room now!” he snapped at the maid while he lifted the love of his life off the floor.

Blood rushed through his ears as he tried to process the news. Could it be that the maid was carrying his child? That they had made love to one another when he was barely conscious of himself and could not remember?

Could he have been so stupid at any point in his life to have done such an act and not even remember it? Could this be the end of the fairytale he was living with Isabel?

Yesterday …

George was taking his usual stroll through the streets of the city. With Aunt Mariam gone, he had no companion to walk around the streets and go to one of the dinners with. He knew few people would be around at this time, hence the temptation to drink and gamble would be less to none.

He placed an order for fruit of the vine and some bread after taking a seat at one of the tables. He brought out his notebook and began to note down ideas he had for a small story. He had seen some children running down the streets and wondered about the life of the street children. How difficult it must have been to grow up without a roof over one's head, but despite that, they still looked happier than some of the nobles he had met.

George Montgomery was not one to be called a social butterfly, but for the first time in a long time, going to a ball did him some good and presented the beautiful maiden to him.

Her name was Lady Elizabeth William, the only daughter of Lord Victor William II. They had met at a ball the Duke hosted on behalf of his daughter's party and instantly bonded over their love for art and literature.

A while after their conversation, they had decided to meet up at Le Bonsuier, a famous French restaurant in the city. Seeing her come on a horse by herself reminded him of his sister Isabel. He could not wait to have another conversation with her the minute she came down from the horse.

"So tell me, a beautiful young lady with love for literature and art that rides a horse like a fierce warrior…where have you been hiding all my life?" he pondered with excitement in his voice.

"Alive of course." Her voice was soft but firm all the same, one that he knew he had to write a poem about sometime.

“And witty too,” he said, biting into his fish.

“What I bet you would be reading, Jane Austen?”

“Why definitely, but that would be second to William Shakespeare.”

“Hmm, I see… you write?”

“Yes, a few pieces, nothing groundbreaking, I’m afraid.”

“Oh save the modesty, how I wish I had the talent of turning words into stories.”

“Are you alright?” a strange man said taking a seat opposite him.

“Why yes, and you are?” he asked, curious about the tall ginger bearded man that stood before him.

“I’m Gregory Wordsworth, but you can call me Greg if you like to.”

“Pleasure meeting you, Greg.”He smiled. There was something intriguing about this man and his aura.

“Pleasure is mine,” he said ordering a beer.

“You have a striking resemblance to your sister, that face is a Montgomery signature, I’ll say.”

“You’ve met my sister?”

“Why yes. Worked with the Baron a few weeks after the lady came in. Left there a couple of weeks ago even, started my own tea shop down across the street,” he said taking a swig of his beer.

“Oh yes. She’s a companion of Lady Beatrice. I trust they’re faring well?”

“Miss Montgomery is, but I’m afraid for Lady Beatrice’s life. I hear her condition is getting worse by the minute.”

“What condition?”

“You don’t know? The Lady’s been sick for the past month, physicians have never seen an illness such as that. It’s such a pity, the Lady’s such a pleasant person.”

“Oh my Lord! I hadn’t gotten news about that. I’m sure Isabel did not want me bothered.”

“Very sure that’s it. You best be careful these days, one can’t trust people anymore,” he added.

“And why’d you say such, Greg?” he enquired.

He looked back and forth before speaking. “There’s a rumor going on that the maid is the one poisoning the Lady. The servants know there is something quite fishy about that woman, but there’s no proof, and nobody wants to lose his job, right?”

“That’s right, but what do you think? Could the maid be capable of such?”

“Hell, yes! I remember the last place we worked in together. She poisoned the Lord’s wife. They threw her in prison, but she seduced her way out of there. Sour woman!”

“And the maid now works with the Baron?”

“Yes, I believe she still does.”

“Meet me at this address at dawn tomorrow morning, Greg. Let’s hope we can save Lady Beatrice from this vile woman’s hand,” he said writing down his home address. The horror of how true this might be sent chills to his bones. His sister could be in danger, and he would not have known.

Her brother’s scent was one she could not miss even in her sleep. She opened her eyes to see him staring down at her.

“Hello,” he said, smiling teasingly. His sense of humour at odd times never ceased to amaze her.

“George!” she exclaimed as much as her dry throat allowed her.

“Here have some water,” he said, handing her a silver chalice.

“Thank you.” She took it from his hands and gulped it down in an unladylike manner.

“You’re very much welcome, sister.” He touched her hair then stared into her eyes.

“What are you doing here? I was not aware you would be arriving

anytime soon."

"My apologies for not sending word out, my dear, but I hurried down here when I heard about Lady Beatrice. I came with my physician to have a look and diagnose it as well."

"Thank you, that was very kind of you."

"Anything for a friend, my dear."

"How are you?" The genuine concern in his face nearly broke her.

"I don't know, George. The past few days have not been the most pleasant."

"Tell me all."

"Lady Beatrice's health has been terrible; the physicians do not know what is wrong with her, or the cure for it. She has not woken up for the entire day even," she said choking on a sob.

"Hmm, so I heard when I came in. Are you sure that is the only thing troubling you?"

She stared at him; she could not hide anything from her brother. It would have been much worse. She had come to trust him more after the loss of their parents; he was all she had.

"Lord William and I are lovers." She sniffed.

"Well that was expected, I could see the way in which he looked at you from my last visit. It was only a matter of time." He smiled. "You love him?"

“Yes, but he does not trust me. He accused me of poisoning his sister, and now the maid claims to be pregnant with his child, and I do not know what to do.”

“Which of the maids would that be? The one that served us the last time?”

“Miss Bryn, yes. She’s in charge of Lady Beatrice’s well-being.”

“I knew there was something odd about that woman. The way she threw daggers at you with her eyes and stared at the Baron like he was some sort of trophy.”

“How did you notice and remember all these things?”

“The curse of an introvert, dear Isabel. We observe every detail around us.” He chuckled. “Leave everything to me, my dear. We will conduct a proper investigation on matters with the poison.”

“What about the pregnancy? What if she is carrying his child?”

“Then we will know what to do after an investigation. We shall take it one step at a time, alright?”

She nodded. His calmness gave her the assurance that she had been searching for.

“Lord William, may I see you privately please?” George asked peeping into his chambers.

“Of course. How is Isabel faring? Has she woken up yet?” he asked.

“Yes, she has. I told her to get some rest.”

“I hope you do not mind, but I brought my personal physician to have a look at Lady Beatrice.”

“Of course not, that was very thoughtful of you. I pray he can diagnose what this illness is and find a cure before it is too late.”

“I hope so too, My Lord.”

They stood there in silence for a minute or two.

“My sister says you think Lady Beatrice was poisoned,” George said breaking the silence.

“Miss Bryn, the maid suggested it. Her suspicion was on Miss Isabel, but it does not make any sense that she would hurt my sister in anyway.”

“Have you thought that Miss Bryn might be the culprit?”

“No, why would she do that? She’s been working with us for years now, and she has done nothing of the sort.”

“I believe an investigation would be necessary in this situation.”

“I believe so as well.”

“I can oversee it thoroughly. I have a witness that claims she has done something similar before coming here. We might at least need to know what kind of poison for a cure.”

“Very well then, search her chambers, let us be sure.”

“My sister says Miss Bryn claims to be pregnant with your child?” he lifted a brow.

“That was what she said. I am very uncertain how true it is.”

“Were both of you lovers before? Was she one of the women you bedded?”

“I am uncertain. She claims we made love when I returned home drunk and I may have been too drunk to remember it happen.”

A knock on the door interrupted them.

“Come in.”

“Your tea, My Lord,” a maid said coming in with a tray.

“Thank you; you can set it on the table there.”

“Yes, My Lord,” she replied.

“I’ll have the physician do a pregnancy test as well.”

“He can do that?”

“Yes, he’s one of the best.”

“I hope she is lying; there is no one I want to spend the rest of my life with apart from Isabel.”

“Um…Pardon me, My Lord. If I may intrude, there would be no need for the physician to check, she is lying.”

“And you know this how?” George asked.

“I share the same quarters with Miss Bryn,” the maid said. “She has been having her monthly courses, so it is impossible for her to be carrying a child,” the lady said more firmly. It would be such a shame to see Isabel go because of the vile woman that Rachel.

The maid had never seen the Baron this happy since Miss Isabel came into his life. She did not have the stomach to watch it crumble when she knew she could do something about it. She hoped this would help in some way.

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth, I appreciate your honesty,” the Baron replied, letting out a sigh of relief.

“It is a pleasure, My Lord,” she said then left the room.

“It is like this is the first good news I have received in a long time,” the Baron said smiling to himself.

“Don’t worry, My Lord, all will fall into place,” he said with a nod then left him to himself.

George knew it was his responsibility to look out for his sister; he needed to protect her well-being and her reputation as well. He could not allow her to take the blame for another lady's action.

He took the physician to Lady Beatrice's room first. The man specialised in poisons and dangerous toxins for the body. If there were anyone who would know if it were a poison caused the disease, it would have been him. He called his sister to stay with Lady Beatrice and the physician while he went with Greg to search Miss Bryn's chambers.

He had summoned Gregory and Elizabeth to join him in searching Miss Bryn's chambers.

They lifted her bags and sheets, searching for any evidence that could pin her to the poison on Lady Beatrice's case.

For over an hour, their search proved futile.

"I found it!" Elizabeth exclaimed, holding a small black bottle in her hand. She had found it inside a part of Rachel's bag. She had to admit the lady's craftiness was really thorough, but truth always has a way of prevailing against evil.

"This is the poison she used for Lady Beatrice. I had always known the woman was evil, but this is quite insane," she added reading the label on the bottle and the warnings.

"Let's go; this is all the evidence we need," George ordered leading them to the Baron's office.

Rachel walked to the Baron's office, overwhelmed with excitement; her plan worked. She was very certain that the Baron had called her

to his office to tell her about the wedding plans. She could already imagine it. she would be called Lady Rachel, all these servants would be serving her soon, and Isabel? She would have been long gone by then.

Life was amazing for people like her; all her hard work finally paid off.

“My Lord, you wanted to see me?” she said, batting her eyes as she swayed her hips while walking into the office.

“Miss Bryn, can you tell me what this is?” the Baron said, pointing at the bottle George had already brought up for him earlier.

“A bottle,” she said twirling a lock of hair with her finger.

“It’s poison, you witch! We found it in your bags. You tried to poison my sister!”

“How dare you accuse me of such? I did no such thing!”

“Your lies will not save you this time, Rachel,” George said from the back of the chair.

“It is your fault! You and that wretched sister of yours conspired against me! I am pregnant with your child, and you dare to believe I would bring harm to you and your sister! This is preposterous!”

“Another lie that will not save you, my dear,” Elizabeth said, “you just had your monthly course this month; it is impossible for you to be pregnant at this time.”

“You rat! I did not do anything! I am innocent!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

A knock interrupted the scene that was beginning to unfold.

“My Lord, Lady Beatrice has awoken from her slumber,” the small stable girl said peeping into the room; he remembered her to be the gardener’s daughter. “She requests to see you.”

“Oh thank goodness!” he said letting out a sigh of relief.

“Go to your sister, My Lord. I will send word to the inspector for an arrest. I will handle everything from here.”

“I am indebted to you, George, thank you.” He stood up and pulled him in for a brotherly hug.

“What are friends for, now go on.”He smiled, waving him off.

He adjusted his coat and made an attempt at arranging his already dishevelled hair while he dashed towards his sister’s room.

“Beatrice,” he called, falling to his knees at the side of her bed. “My you had me in distress, thank goodness you’re okay.” He took her hands and pressed a kiss to them.

“Oh brother, I’m a fighter remember?” she said, managing a small laugh for his sake.

He noticed how thinner her fame had become, and how hollow her eyes were. He made a promise to himself to personally oversee her feeding for the next few weeks.

“How do you feel? You have been sleeping for the past two days now. I was afraid I was going to lose you.”

“I feel wonderful, My Lord, although my throat is quite scratchy and my body aches, nothing I cannot quite fuss about.”

“I shall see to it that you get a massage, some food and well-needed rest my dear, do not worry.”

“Alright brother. Where is Isabel, I thought I heard her in my sleep earlier.

“She probably left for a while; she will be back soon, I hope.”

“Well of course she will, she’s my friend, and she’s my sister.”

“Hmm, have some water dear, don’t bother yourself, just get a much-needed rest, I assume you will be terribly tired right now,” he said handing her a cup of water.

“Thank you. Now tell me what happened; sleeping for almost two days was enough rest for now, I believe.” She could always sense when he was trying to hide something from her. “What happened while I was asleep?”

“Nothing Beatrice, nothing at all. Get some rest okay? I will have the physician come take a look at you again,” he said standing up and walking towards the door.

“Of course you will bring him over then vanish again. I wish Father were here.” It was a painful subject to talk about, but at least she

knew it would bring him to talk to her.

“I know, I miss them too. Mother was always so caring, and Father always knew what to do in times like this,” he said with a pause, summoning up all the courage he had to look her in the face as he continued, “I have failed you, my dear. I could not realise that the problem was caused by someone I trusted.”

“What do you mean?”

“The diagnosis says you have been poisoned, and we found the bottle in Miss Rachel’s room.”

“I always knew that woman was up to no good. Bloody wretch. I should have raised the alarm earlier.”

“I am sorry. I did not do a good job of taking good care of you like I promised my father.”

“You are doing your best, William, and your best is good enough for me,” she said pulling him into a hug.

It seemed as though Isabel’s bold nature was starting to rub off on her too, and he missed her all the more for that.

He was not sure if she would ever forgive him or comeback to him, but he was going to try.

“How is Isabel? I’m quite surprised I haven’t seen her,” Beatrice asked curiously, setting down the cup on the table beside her.

“She is furious with me.”

“How come?”

He sighed, dreading the fact that he had to tell his sister everything but realising he needed someone to talk to about his problems.

“When you could not wake up, I was terribly devastated. I was not sure what to think or do. I thought it was all my fault, that I should have taken care of you better and prevented it from happening, but Isabel gave me hope, she said you were still breathing and although that was not what I wanted to hear, I held on to that strand of hope in your life. The only thing giving me peace was that she was there, and that was my only strength.

“Then Miss Bryn came into my chambers and said Isabel poisoned you. I did not believe it at all, but the logic was strong, and I could not but turn a blind eye to it. I just had to be sure because this woman was already driving me insane.” He threw his hands up for emphasis.

“Isabel would never do such a thing. She could barely hurt a fly even!”

“I know, I thought the same thing too, but I still needed to ask questions. It was your life; I could not have you depart and allow your killer to roam free. So I asked her, more like accused her of doing it. She was offended, but I pleaded with her to forgive me, and she did. Then not long after Miss Bryn came in and claimed to be pregnant with my child. I knew I lost her when that news came in, and Isabel fainted, that was when her brother came in with the physician and took over the investigation of both crimes.”

“I always knew there was something about that woman, thank God she has been caught, but what about Miss Isabel? Have you told her?”
“No, I’m afraid it would not matter anymore. She hates me; all my mistakes keep coming back. I can never be free from my dangerous habits.”

“Of course you can. She loves you, My Lord. She does, and she will

forgive you because that is what love is about."

"Hmm…How do you know so much about love, young one?"

"I read, you should do that sometime," she teased.

"I'll have you know, I am quite a voracious reader mind you."

"Of course you are, and I sing in the opera."

They laughed at her sarcasm as he took his seat again.

"I hope to find love someday like you did with Miss Isabel."

"You will have to leave your room every once in a while for that to happen," he teased.

"Of course I would. At some point, I thought I was going to die, and there was nothing to look back on, nothing exciting, just you and Isabel. My wish is to live William, smell the flowers, travel around the world, and ride a horse too."

"Why that is quite wonderful; I'll see to it as soon as you have fully recovered."

"Thank you brother, now go and make things right with Isabel."
The fear in his eyes made her laugh. "She will not bite you, My Lord, now the truth has been exposed. Miss Bryn will be punished accordingly, and she will not allow this to come in between both of you."

"You are right; pray luck will be on my side."

“Love will be enough.”

He stopped at the door before leaving. “You know you are quite a smart one.”

“Why thank you, My Lord,” she said with her nose in the air.

He walked out of the room to do what he knew he should have done a long time ago.

Chapter 25

He stood in front of her door, shaking in his boots and rehearsing what he was going to say to her. For the first time in a long time, he wished his father was here to tell him what to say to her; he always knew the right things to say in every situation. He took a deep breath in and knocked half hoping some sort of miracle would send the fear away. He knocked again before pushing the door open after not receiving a response.

She was always a breathtaking sight; he did not know how but his breath hung in his throat when his eyes beheld her, the mass of red hair was set free from the scarf she had on earlier, framing her face as she sat on the bed in her dress with her feet close to her chest. Her frame looked smaller compared to the way she looked in the morning.

The smell of her room reminded him of their night of passion; the memory was strong, most definitely the best he had ever had, never had a woman driven him wild like she did, or touched his heart of concern at the same time. He wondered what he would say first to break the silence, but she was a step ahead of him.

“What do you seek, My Lord?” she asked without moving an inch or turning to face him.

“Lady Beatrice is awake,” he said, scratching the back of his head. Suddenly he felt like a young lad trying to woo a woman.

“Thank goodness! I will go to see her,” she said standing up. Despite the mixed feelings she harboured towards the Baron, she still loved his sister, and this news brought some sort of hope to her gloomy world.

She pushed her hair to the back with her hands and tied it with a band while walking towards her door.

She stopped when she felt his hand on her shoulder.

“Rachel is not pregnant,” he started, “and the poison was found in her room. Your brother has sent word to the Inspector; she will be arrested, and justice will prevail.”

“That is also good news, My Lord, I am glad. If I may, I wish to see Lady Beatrice now,” she said, pushing his hands off her shoulder.

During this period she had taken time to think about her relationship with the Baron. A man of an ignoble reputation was not one her parents would have wished for her. She needed a man with integrity and a good reputation. Even if Rachel had been lying, how many others could have been telling the truth considering how many women he had already bedded in the past? Was this how her matrimonial home would look like if they were to become united in Holy Matrimony? The thoughts had gone in and out of her head for a good portion of the day, and she came to a conclusion she knew would be best for both of them; she would leave the house as soon as Lady Beatrice had fully recovered.

“Isabel please,” his voice trembled at the thought of losing her once again. “Forgive me.”He could not hold himself anymore; he pulled her into his arms and pressed his lips to hers.

Her initial struggle frightened him until she melted into the kiss. The softness of her lips in between his teeth was just as nerve-wracking as their tongues danced with one another. Their bodies moved in sync as their hearts beat as one. His hands had a firmer grip on her waist, pulling her to his chest almost in a bid to make their bodies one.

“I love you, Isabel Montgomery,” he sighed against her lips like a prayer.

She stopped and gradually eased away. “We can’t be together.”

“Why is that?” Her words stopped him in his tracks. “You don’t feel the same way?”

“Oh no, My Lord, I do, but we are not right for one another. I do not know if I can keep up with the women you bedded coming to my matrimonial home claiming they carry your heir. Miss Bryn might just be the first of many.”

His head was bowed in shame as she ran out of the room unable to stare at his face again.

She ran to the only place she knew she could seek refuge from the tears that kept running down her face. Her heart ached with the decision she had made, but she consoled herself by telling herself that she made the right decision despite how wrong it felt.

Bursting into Lady Beatrice’s room, she dried her tears for her sake and fringed a smile.

“My Lady, you’re awake,” she said running over to her side and giving her a hug.

“I have been waiting for you, my angel. Now I feel better already.

“That is great news, but not in this dark room,” she said walking over to the curtains and pulling them apart. “When will you ever learn to leave the curtains open?”

“When I decide to roll in hay.”

“Perhaps the antidote you were given touched your sarcasm bone My Lady,” she replied with a laugh.

“I guess it did.” She laughed. “You’re unhappy, Isabel.”

“How could I be unhappy when you are recovering from this terrible illness?”

“I beg of you Isabel, do not lie to me,” she warned. “It’s my brother, is it not?”

She nodded, fighting the tears that threatened to fall.

“What happened?”

With that question Isabel told her everything.

“…I love him, but I do not know if we can be together. What if more women come, claiming to have his heir?”

“I understand your fear my dear, but he loves you greatly, and you love him as well. If there is anything almost dying has taught me, it is to take the chances while we still have time. As long as both of you love one another, no matter the storm that passed, you will stand firm.”

“But is love enough?”

“Yes Isabel, love is enough. And if you let it guide you, despite the dark days you will endure, happiness will always spring forth. So dry your tears my darling, follow your heart.”

“The antidote really brings out a different you,My Lady; you would make a wonderful poet.”

“I would wouldn’t I? I intend to write more soon. I want to live more.”

“You should, life does look good on you.”

“Most certainly it does!”

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation among the ladies. The third knock confirmed who it was. Isabel’s hands shook with nervousness, but Beatrice held them in hers for comfort before she called him in.

“My Lady, Miss Montgomery,” the Baron greeted entering the room.

His eyes never left Isabel despite how much hers tried to avoid his. “I should be going for my walk now, the physician recommends more sunlight,” she said with a smile at both of them.

Oh dear God, let them do the right thing for both of them, she prayed inwardly as she walked out of the room leaving them to their privacy.

“Isabel,” he started. “I am sorry.” His hands dishevelled his hair again. “I have terrible habits, and I know it will not be easy to stop them, but I will learn for your sake. For you I will abandon the liquor, the cards, the women, the late nights for you. I know we have differences, but I will be willing to accept them, so we can grow together.

“I love you so much, Isabel.” He walked towards her, allowing his hand to caress her cheek. “I do not want to imagine a life without you in mine, please stay with me.”

“William, I am afraid,” she started. “I’m afraid of loving you, of what will happen to both of us, but I love you so much as well. I cannot leave. After spending many months here and thinking about everything, I cannot leave even if I wanted to. This already feels like

home to me. So My Lord you're stuck with me." She smiled, lifting her lips to meet his.

"I would want nothing more, Miss Montgomery." He smiled back against her lips. "If you need anything, just name it, for I have become a slave to you," he muttered trailing his lips down her neck.

"So I can make meals myself?"

"Of course."

"And I can travel with you on trips?"

"Most definitely, hell, I'll even teach you how to ride a horse properly," he teased.

"Are you saying I do not know how to ride a horse properly?" she said, pulling away.

"No, how can I? I only said I would teach you how to do so." She smiled sheepishly.

"We'll have a race one of these days, and I'll show you."

"Of course you will," he said, giving her a kiss on the lips.

One Month Later…

Lady Beatrice had fully recovered from her illness. She took a walk through the garden, basking in the sunrays and sipping lemon juice from her cup as she greeted the gardeners who waved at her.

Her bones felt stronger and ready for more adventures; she picked out

some berries from the trees and put some in her mouth savouring their rough sweet taste. It was a good day to be alive. Isabel had decided to stay with them, helping her with lessons in different skills such as horseback riding, archery, swimming, and a whole lot more.

She could be no more grateful than she was right now, with Isabel and her brother by her side, there was nothing she could not do.

The gardener's daughter came up beside her.

"Good afternoon, My Lady," she greeted with a smile. Seeing Lady Beatrice come to the garden more was such a delight for the young girl; she was so excited to have her around seeing as no one saw her much before Miss Montgomery came to join them in the household.

The lady got spectacles during the time she was sick, and she had never seen a lady look more adorable in them.

"Good afternoon dear." She turned to the soft voice that called out to her. "And what might your name be my love?" she asked, taking in her slender features.

"Rebecca, My Lady."

"Oh what a nice name my dear. I suppose you could accompany me around the fields, seeing as I barely remember the way it used to be during spring."

"It'll be my pleasure, my lady!" the girl said dropping her basket on the floor. "We could start from here! This is the garden of berries as you can see," she said in a sing-song voice full of enthusiasm. Her long brown hair was tied up in a bun while she worked on the fields, her basket had already been filled with berries from this year's harvest, and she was supposed to collect more, but seeing as it was Lady Beatrice's wish that she would accompany her, she could not have been more delighted to follow.

The girl walked across the rows of trees, explaining the cycle of each area, and giving her insight as to how the plants were harvested and grown.

Beatrice took in all she said with a half heart; it excited her to smell the soil once again. She needed to come out more often and understand how to run the household alongside her brother, just like Isabel wanted.

Seeing her brother happy with this woman who had come to be much more than a sister made her soul dance in happiness. She had brought out the best version of William. After he met her he had stopped his drinking and gambling habits altogether, leaving him more time to attend to business and manage the estate, and most especially keep an eye on things to prevent the incident that happened with Rachel from happening again. The thought of the maid that almost ended her life caused a frown to form on her lips. She had never been sure of this woman and always had her suspicions, but she did not say anything without evidence or proof. Her instinct just told her not to trust the lady, and unfortunately she discovered she was right through the least pleasurable ways. She thanked the Lord that they were able to figure out what was really going on and send her to prison where she belonged.

“Looks like you need to take lessons on the horse riding My Lord, maybe then you can win,” Isabel shouted while she dashed across the fields with her horse.

She wore her boy pants, boots, and tied her hair in a ponytail that flew behind her as her dark horse galloped down the fields.

“My love, as long as I have you, I am always victorious,” he replied.

The sweet unexpected compliment threw her off guard as her pace slowed down, and he quickly sped by meeting the finish line just minutes before she could make it.

“Oh, you dirty rascal!” She laughed meeting him there.

“It is all in the lips My Lady, and we both know how much you love it so.”

“Oh, really, My Lord?”

“Of course.” He climbed down from his horse. “Allow me to prove it to you,” he concluded, sweeping her off her horse in one swift move.

His lips crashed into hers, nibbling and licking at every instance they had. Their tongues danced to the rhythm of their laughs. He wanted nothing more than having her in his arms, laughing in the fields, and teasing one another.

“I told you that you love it, my love.”

“Hmm, it’s not horrible, I’ll say.”

“Let’s arrive at the chambers, and I shall see how well you will scream.”

“Of course you will, and you will groan like a horse during delivery.”

“You know I am quite certain you will be more obedient and ladylike when you become my wife; at least that sharp tongue of yours will be.”

“Is this your idea of a proposal, My Lord?” she asked with a laugh.

“You can have one however you like, my dear; just say the word, and it will be done.”

“Oh, I could not have asked for one more perfect than this, My Lord,” she said pulling him into a kiss. “And no, I will most certainly not be ladylike even if we were to have three children.”

“Wonderful, as long as they have your eyes, I would not have it any other way.

George Montgomery had never been one for social outings and festivities, but tonight had been extremely outstanding. The ballet performance during the interlude was a splendid display of grace and elegance. He always admired ballet dancers, their grace their tenacity, everything about them had a way of making him excited, igniting a spark within his muse.

He watched the play unfold scene by scene showing the tales of pain, betrayal, and fierce loyalty in William Shakespeare’s tale about Julius Caesar; the man was truly a legend that he wished would reach the height of literary fame. His works were one of a kind, and he wished someday he could meet this genius and tell him how much his tales had aided his own writing journey.

A lady sat beside him sniffing to herself and dabbing away the tears when the final war scene took place.

“Oh, here you go, My Lady, I’m afraid the play reached my emotions as well,” he said handing her his handkerchief.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the piece of embroidered cloth from him. “I hate to see a tragic tale; how could a man be so cruel as to

stab his friend in the back?" She sniffed.

"I'm afraid that is how life is even in reality, My Lady, although I am still puzzled by this human mind of ours, such a funny thing, don't you think?"

"Why yes of course; no two minds can ever be the same. It always has various ways of responding to things, even acts of kindness can be reciprocated with deeds of evil like the spiteful Brutus and Cassius."

"Exactly, my hope is that I do not fall victim of such people, my dear, it would be quite unfortunate."

"It most definitely will, My Lord. How could the world loose a fine man such as yourself to the hands of the wicked? It would be such a pity."

"Oh, you flatter me, My Lady. I would not mean much I can assure you and the world would move on," he said, allowing the dull ache in his heart to beat for the loss of his parents. "The world will always move on from the death of its own, and despite its tales of how much it needs us, in the end, the world will bring out more people to take the place of those it lost as well as new souls to cause it to bloom forth.

The end of the scene ended in a bloodbath with the character Antonio and his team as the victors in the battle.

The audience stood screaming and applauding.

"Bravo! Bravo! Wonderful! Splendid! Amazing!" came from different parts of the hall as the actors came out and bowed in appreciation.

He watched her from the corner of his eye, her petite size did a whole lot in drawing empathy from a man. She had full round lips that were

alluring with the dark circle at the edge of them. Her eyes went wide with excitement as she applauded with much enthusiasm. He was not sure if he could make out the shade, but he was determined to find out.

“I am Vitoria Lawdwig; it has been a pleasure talking to you, My Lord,”she said, extending her hand towards him.

“Oh a Lord, no, no, no,” he said shaking his head. “I’m George Montgomery, it’s been a lovely evening with you, Miss Lawdwig.”

“Oh please, Victoria would suite fine,” she assured him.“I almost forgot. Here you go, thank you.”

“Oh no, my dear, let it serve as a reminder until we meet again.”

“Why wouldn’t that be a pleasure?”

“That means I’ll save you a seat at the ballet next weekend, then.”

“That would be splendid idea. I will have to be going now. I look forward to seeing you again soon, George.”

“As do I, my love,” he said watching her green dress trail behind her.

Her eyes were a deep shade of blue, the loveliest shade he had seen. He knew he would paint soon.

THE END

Can't get enough of Isabel and the Baron? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

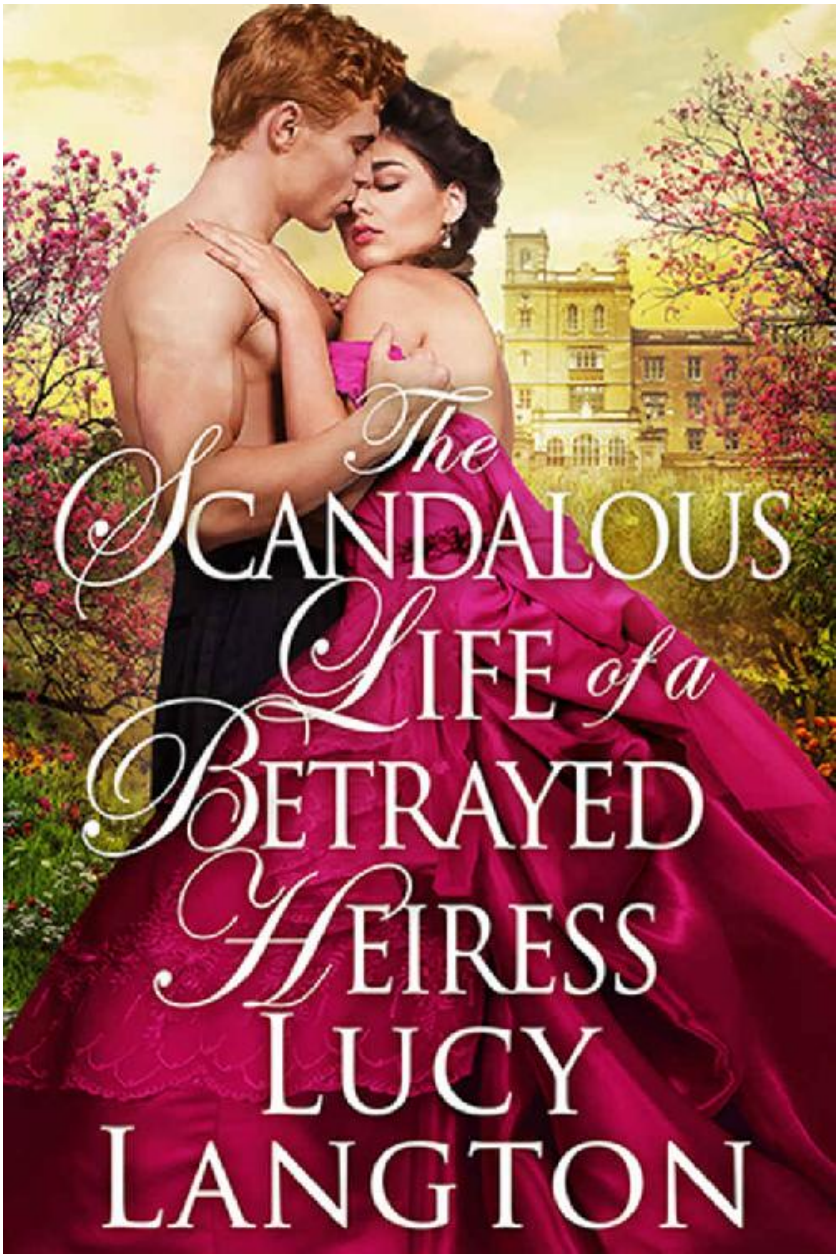
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What will make the Baron sentimental upon seeing his sister dancing again after all this time?

What kind of announcement can make the Baron fall more in love with his wife?

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(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from ***"The Scandalous Life of a Betrayed Heiress"****, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


The Scandalous Life of a Betrayed Heiress
Lucy Langton

The Scandalous Life of a Betrayed Heiress

Introduction

Sophia Barberry is an American Heiress of the highest order, but she'd much rather spend her time with her nose in a book. When her father seals an alliance with Lord Timothy, the future Duke of Cumberland, Sophia embraces her fate. But the heiress' new life ends up being far less grand than she ever imagined. Her new husband proves himself to be distant and refuses to embrace his duty. When she becomes closer and closer to the Duke's brother, will the gap of her non-existent husband be filled?

Philip, the Duke's military-minded brother, with no riches to call his own, had no choice but to turn into a soldier. Having served a long time overseas he took the decision to have some time off with his brother. As a soldier, he tends to find Americans rebellious and unsophisticated, which creates an undeniable tension between him and his brother's wife. With time, this friendship will turn into something dangerous for both of them. Is this relationship worth risking everything he has?

In a world where secrets cannot be revealed and hidden desires are forbidden, Sophia discovers that there's much more to her new life in Britain than meets the eye. Caught between the ignorance of her husband and the love of his brother, will she choose to risk it all for

passion?

Chapter 1

Sophia Barberry stood in the salon of her 5th Avenue townhouse frowning to herself. All of New York society was stuffed into that room, with its high ceilings, expensive oil paintings and glittering chandeliers. And even though Sophie was surrounded by the who's-who, she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to her life.

Across the room stood her future husband, a man she barely knew. Lord Timothy was to inherit the Clumber dukedom, and he certainly looked the part. His navy coat and tails were immaculate, his waistcoat made by the finest tailors, and his hair was done in the Roman style. However, written on the future duke's face was nothing but disinterest. He was a shockingly handsome man, with sandy blond hair and aquamarine eyes. His stature was erect and composed, his bearing immaculate, but Sophia couldn't get over that smug look on Timothy's face.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Sophia's father Henry said. "We have gathered you here today to announce the engagement of our daughter, Sophia Barberry, to the future Duke of Clumber!"

Henry was a balding man, short in height, and he held a glass of champagne aloft. The other guests did the same, toasting what seemed to be an advantageous marriage for all.

Sophia did not hold a glass up but continued to frown. The arrangement was more advantageous for Lord Timothy than anyone else. She knew full well that the dukedom was suffering from poverty and that her family's wealth would amend that quickly. Henry was a titan of the shipping industry in New York, and his wealth was renowned. It made perfect sense that the current Duke of Clumber took it upon himself to reach out to the Barberry family in order to secure the match.

Not only was Lord Timothy inheriting Sophia's wealth, he was also going to be keeper of her beauty. Her dark raven hair and green eyes

were the stuff of legend in New York, and her compact, petite form was admired by all. But just because Lord Timothy towered over her at his stunning six feet and four inches did not mean that he could tower over her in spirit. More famous than Sophia's beauty was her fierce intelligence and will. She had always wished that she could escape the marriage game, but she knew it was impossible considering her status. Sophia would be perfectly content to spend the rest of her days in the library, hungrily reading books and expanding her mind. But, alas, duty called.

That wasn't to say that Sophia shunned marriage entirely. The fact was that she was terribly bored with New York society and all its trappings. Escaping to England would be a welcome solace, and Sophia couldn't wait to see all the sights abroad. She had never travelled outside of America, mostly because Henry and her mother, Martha, had kept her under lock and key for most her life. Finally, the prison gates were open, and Sophia was ready to see the world. If only she could do it on her own.

Yes, Sophia would reinvent herself in England. She'd no longer be the reclusive beauty that made tongues wag from up and down 5th Avenue. Finally, Sophia Barberry would become the worldly woman that she always wished to be, and if that meant having to hang on the arm of the Duke of Clumber, then so be it.

"Have you anything to say, M'Lord?" Henry Barberry said to Lord Timothy, and all eyes turned towards the future duke.

Just then, Sophia sneezed, and Lord Timothy darted a gaze her way, as though his future bride had purposefully stolen the spotlight.

"On behalf of the Clumber name," Lord Timothy began, "I'd like to express my happiness."

Silence. That was all. His words were as icy as his demeanour and Sophia found herself wishing for a more eloquent husband.

A servant passed with a silver tray and Lord Timothy hastily picked up a flute of champagne. He smiled warmly at the servant and thanked him for the refreshment, and Sophia wondered if perhaps he was a nice fellow after all, but merely disguising the fact. She had observed him for the better part of the afternoon and noted that he was cordial with those around him. So why was it that every time they had briefly encountered, he had been aloof and almost sullen? Sophia thought that perhaps it was very British of him. Was it not the custom in their country to be cold to those with whom they were least? It was a puzzle Sophia had not yet solved.

"Daughter, have you any words?" Henry asked, and she felt all eyes turn on her.

Sophia cleared her throat and thought of what to say. She did not fear public speaking so much as the dread of saying the wrong thing. She was accustomed to saying the first thing that came to mind and had trouble censoring herself. Often that landed Sophia into a great deal of trouble, because what sprung from her mouth was the truth. Nobody wanted to hear that.

"I'm delighted to be a part of the Clumber family," Sophia began, looking around the room tentatively.

But I do wish that I was marrying someone who would smile now and again. Or at least be more than a sculpture made of ice.

"And this union between Clumber and Barberry is, I know, one that is pleasing for all involved," Sophia went on. Everyone she knew surrounded her. There were aunts and uncles, cousins, godparents, society aficionados Sophia had been raised with. They all had polite smiles on their faces as she spoke. Sophia assumed that it must be the effect of the champagne on them. "Of course, the customs in America are quite different than the customs in Britain," she continued, "and I'm sure that in time, the duke and I will grow to understand each other's differences and learn from one another."

"Hear, hear!" Henry said, raising his glass again.

Sophia looked towards her mother, whose eyes were shining. Why should her mother be so proud of the situation? Martha knew full well that Sophia was not keen to marry, yet she couldn't help but note the motherly pride that comes from seeing one's only child married off to someone of high standing. But the fellow didn't even have money! How was it that New York society was so impressed by her marriage to a poor duke? Sophia reasoned it was because Americans were keen on all things British. Somehow, in their eyes, it made Sophia superior for becoming a duchess. But she could clearly see beyond all that and comprehend the situation for what it truly was: a business transaction. And it was a transaction that didn't even benefit the Barberry name in any way.

Sophia, however, wise as she was for being only nineteen, knew that it wasn't about money so much as it was titles. To have a daughter with an English title was appealing for any American, no matter their financial standing. Sophia was going to be captive to that fact, but she would make the best of it.

"*Canapé*?" a servant asked her, presenting an assortment of finger food on a silver tray.

"Why not?" Sophia replied, taking a small pastry. The contents of the pastry were what she perceived to be spinach and cheese, and her tongue delighted in it. If her American family was obsessed with all things British, their palates favoured all things French. French cuisine was the chosen repast of Martha, who insisted French food be served at all her dinner parties and family events. Sophia didn't mind this food. On the contrary, she had grown to love the richness of it, but she did fear the food that would greet her in England. She had heard horror stories about the bland, Spartan repast of the British. But as with everything else, she would make the best of it.

As the guests began to mingle and eat, Sophia looked across the stately salon and noticed that Lord Timothy was eyeing her. As soon as their gazes met, Lord Timothy looked away. Such strange behaviour from a future husband.

“Are you excited?” Kitty Carmichael, one of Sophia’s oldest friends, asked.

“I suppose,” Sophia replied wistfully.

“I’m so jealous that you’re going to London.”

“I think we’re only in town for a few months of the year,” Sophia explained. “The rest of the time is spent in the country.”

“A British country estate! How dreamy,” Kitty replied

“I’m told that it’s very impressive. Hopefully the Barberry bank account will bring it back up to standard,” Sophia said wryly, taking a sip from her champagne. She looked over at Lord Timothy, who yet again looked away. Was their entire marriage going to be just so? Was he always going to look away from her, even when she was standing in a state of undress in his chambers? The thought made Sophia quite uneasy.

“I can come and visit, can’t I?” Kitty asked, entwining her arm within Sophia’s.

“Of course, you can. There will be plenty of guest rooms to choose from.”

Sophia wasn’t making it up, or even boasting. Willow Grange, the name of the Clumber country estate, was supposed to be quite palatial, with a staff numbering thirty. Sophia was mildly daunted by the notion of having to care for such a grand estate. And considering that the current Duke of Clumber was in such poor health, it would be no time at all before Sophia would have to be up for the task.

“I’m just so excited,” Emily said, swooping in and taking Sophia’s

other arm. Emily was Martha's sister, and the two looked very much alike. That being said, Martha married a rich businessman and Emily was merely a spinster. Because of that status, she would accompany Sophia on her grand trip across the Atlantic to her new home.

"It will be an adventure," Sophia said to Emily, quite looking forward to the notion of sailing across the sea with her aunt.

"I hope I don't get sick. Rough waters always make me rather ill," Emily said. "But, oh my! Look how handsome your husband is," she went on, looking across at Lord Timothy. "I wish I could say I wasn't jealous."

Sophia frowned. It was so like Aunt Emily to be garish. She was always saying the wrong thing, in Sophia's estimation. And for her to admire the beauty of a man who was ten years her junior was embarrassing, at best.

"I agree," Kitty chimed in. "I've never seen a man so dashing in all my life. Do all British men look like that?"

"Like what?" Sophia asked.

"Like a painting or something. He doesn't even look real."

"Oh, he's real enough," Sophia assured her.

Gazing across the way once more, Lord Timothy's eyes met hers and Sophia gave a pleasant smile, hoping to ease whatever tension might be between them. Lord Timothy did not smile in return but, rather, tightened his collar and looked at her sternly.

So, that's how it's going to be, is it? A lifetime of stern gazes and cold sentiments.

Even though Sophia didn't know who her future husband was going to turn out to be, she couldn't help but feel excitement in her breast. She was beginning a new life, in a new country, and there was no telling what might happen to her there.

Chapter 2

“Lady Sophia,” Sophia said aloud as she looked at herself in the mirror. Just to her right, a window looked onto the vast blue sea. “Lady Sophia,” she repeated, trying the name on for size.

Sophia wasn’t quite sure how she felt about it. It was going to be nice to be called a lady, and a duchess, but she still found it hard to fathom that this new life was only on the horizon.

She got up from her vanity table and took a little walk around her cabin. The SS *Duchess of Gloucester* was the finest ship on the sea, and Sophia was enjoying one of the most luxurious rooms on the top deck. There was no balcony, which was unfortunate, because Sophia wished to step out into the sea air in private. In *lieu* of that, she would take a stroll twice a day along the deck, where she would greet fellow passengers. Sophia had made a lot of good friends on the trip thus far, but the one acquaintance she had yet to make was that of her future husband.

It didn’t trouble Sophia too much that Lord Timothy was still being distant. She had her books and beautiful cabin to keep her company, as well as Aunt Emily and her maid Arabella.

“That gown is lovely, M’am,” Arabella said, folding some garments in the corner.

“Thank you,” Sophia replied, taking another look at herself in the mirror and realising that her violet gown was, indeed, quite exquisite. It was accented by amethyst jewels around her neck and dangling from her ears. The colour of the gown showed off Sophia’s raven hair and shocking green eyes. “Where is Aunt Emily?”

“In her room, I believe. She has taken ill yet again this morning,” Arabella explained.

It seemed as though Aunt Emily had been sick for almost the entire trip. She had quipped beforehand that she hoped it would not be so, but in truth that's exactly what happened. The tossing of the vessel to and fro seemed to have played a cruel trick on Aunt Emily's stomach, and she was only seen once in the dining room, and very rarely on the decks.

Although Sophia felt sorry for her aunt, she still welcomed the privacy that she enjoyed without her presence, and didn't mind Arabella's company in the least, who was a quiet, shy girl. Arabella had what Sophia considered to be an unfortunate physique. She was rail-thin to the point of looking emaciated, with her eyes popping out of her head. Sophia couldn't quite understand why her maid was so underweight, considering that she was fed well, but she chalked it up to far too much strain and activity.

Those were the very things that Sophia avoided. Although she was trim, Sophia thought it was appropriate to have some healthy, womanly curves on her frame. To achieve that, she liked to find the right balance between exertion and repose, and she always chose meals that were not too heavy, while still being nourishing.

Sophia was a marvellously healthy young woman, and that also afforded her clarity of thought and an even temper – when she chose to use it.

"It will be a nice, sunny day today," Arabella said, her folding done. "You should be afforded a nice turn on the deck."

"I look forward to it," Sophia replied.

"Perhaps Lord Timothy should like to join you," Arabella added.

"Perhaps not," Sophia replied plainly.

Although Sophia knew she had to have some sort of escort at all times, she often ignored the fact. She'd walk here and there on the ship, disregarding whether or not Arabella was behind her. For this reason, Arabella was always in a frantic state, trying to catch up with her mistress.

On that morning, Sophia had the sudden inclination to check in on her aunt before going to the dining room for breakfast. And so she opened the door to her room and made a hasty progression without giving notice to her maid, who proceeded to run behind her.

Sophia did not mind mixing with the lower classes, and for that reason she would nod her head to each passer-by, greeting them as she would anyone else in proper society.

"Good morning," she said to an elderly man, who slowly walked with a cane.

"Good morning," the old man replied, tipping his hat.

"Good morning," Sophia said to a young couple, no doubt on their honeymoon.

"Good morning," they replied with eager smiles.

Arabella looked up and down the hall, her eyes even wider. Sophia assumed her maid was in awe of everything.

"Here we are," Sophia said, happening upon her aunt's berth. She knocked upon the door.

"Come in!" she heard Aunt Emily's voice cry.

Sophia found her aunt splayed across her bed, a glass of water by her

side.

“Poor dear,” Sophia said, pulling up a chair beside her aunt’s bed.

“I’ll live,” Aunt Emily replied, coughing a little.

“Arabella, may I have a damp cloth?” Sophia asked.

“Of course.”

The damp cloth procured and handed over, Sophia folded it and placed it upon her aunt’s forehead.

“There, there now.”

“You look lovely today, as always,” Aunt Emily said, her voice hoarse.

“I’m about to have breakfast, and then enjoy a walk in the sea air.”

At the very mention of breakfast and sea air, Aunt Emily paled ever so slightly and closed her eyes.

“May I get you anything?” Sophia asked.

“No, no. I can’t stomach a thing.”

Sophia left her aunt’s chamber and made her way to the deck. She couldn’t believe her eyes. She was greeted with that same beauty every morning, but it still shocked her each and every time. The sky was a light blue with fluffy white clouds, and the sea was a deep blue, the waves gently crashing all around them. Lords and ladies passed on either side, their apparel in various different rich hues. Some ladies

held parasols, while gentlemen extended their arms so that their companions could gingerly hold on.

Did Sophia wish to hold on to the elbow of Lord Timothy? Not particularly. She was perfectly fine on her own, escorting herself. But off in the distance, at the far end of the deck, Sophia could see that Lord Timothy had plenty of company of his own. He was chatting with two fellows, holding what appeared to be a cup of tea and a saucer. and seemed happy enough. From that distance, Sophia could marvel at how pleasant and affable Lord Timothy appeared in the company of others. He was even smiling, something he had never done in Sophia's presence.

She watched as his gaze turned towards her, and Sophia quickly looked away, feigning disinterest.

The bell was sounded to initiate breakfast, and Sophia walked through a large door. The dining room was pure opulence, with high ceilings and a domed roof with frescoed heavens and little cherubs flying around in the soft clouds. There was a light airiness to the room, which Sophia admired. Should she have any say in the decoration of Willow Grange, she would surely remember the interior of the dining room on the SS *Duchess of Gloucester*.

She found her assigned table and watched as a footman pulled out her chair. Seating herself, Sophia smiled as she admired the centre of the large round table. There was a glorious assortment of fruits, arrayed in a tower, as well as fresh pastries that smelt of warm butter. Waiters walked from table to table in their white coats, pouring tea and presenting bread baskets that smelt just as fresh and delectable.

An apricot pastry was placed upon her china plate with silver tongs, as well as a round of fresh white bread and a piece of candied fruit.

"How do you take your tea, M'Lady?" a waiter asked.

"With lemon, I thank you," Sophia replied.

Next out of the kitchen was a hot tray with poached eggs, delicate sausage, stewed tomatoes, and roasted mushrooms. It was a very English breakfast but was not dull in the slightest. That being said, it was a hearty meal and Sophia figured she'd have to take two turns around the deck in order to ensure proper digestion.

Lord Timothy was seated across the table from her, as he had been for most of the trip. It was not customary for unmarried couples to be seated beside one another, and so Lord Timothy kept his distance.

Again, Sophia did not mind this so much, mostly because it gave her the opportunity to observe her future husband. He chatted with those seated beside him and smiled even more as he sipped his tea and heartily ate his eggs and sausage. She noticed the way that he buttered his bread, and Sophia thought that observation to be of importance. She was of the opinion that you could learn a lot about a person by the way they buttered their bread, and so she watched him keenly.

For one thing, Lord Timothy had rather large, masculine hands. There were large veins on the tops of his hands and wrists, but due to his coat she could not see if those veins extended into his forearms, but she had the feeling that they did. He buttered his bread deliberately, gently, but also with a strong hand. A warm flush came to Sophia's cheek as she watched, and she couldn't help but wonder what the meaning of it was. Why should the way that he buttered his bread fluster her so? Sophia turned away and returned her attention to her own breakfast.

"I hope that all are attending the grand ball this evening," a woman at the table remarked. Although she had not spoken to the woman directly, she knew from word of mouth that it was Lady Christie, a wealthy English heiress not unlike Sophia herself. The difference was that Lady Christie was getting on in years and had not chosen a husband yet. She enjoyed spending her time, and money, travelling around the globe with her chaperone. Sophia thought that such an existence seemed idyllic.

“We shall be in attendance,” Lord Nighey replied, his wife at his side.

“There’s nothing else to do,” Lord White added with a scowl. He was the sour one at the table and had been to America on business. Lord White had the face of one who always suffers from dyspepsia.

“And you?” Lady Christie asked, turning towards Lord Timothy. “Will the happy couple be joining us?” She looked back and forth between Sophia and Lord Timothy.

Sophia felt Lord Timothy’s eyes light on her, and there was a moment of trepidation between them.

“We will be in attendance, yes,” Lord Timothy replied.

His use of the word ‘we’ surprised Sophia. It still sounded strange, just as calling herself Lady Sophia in the mirror had sounded strange. It was all words and no substance. In Sophia’s estimation, there was still no ‘we.’

Breakfast having been done, and Sophia’s stomach warm and full, she took her stroll around the deck and felt the cool breeze in her hair. Arabella had set her curls just right that morning, and that meant that they did not give one inch in the wind.

The morning exercise left Sophia feeling tired and she retreated to her cabin to spend the afternoon with a book. Although breakfast and dinner were grand affairs on the SS *Duchess of Gloucester*, afternoon tea was up to one’s choosing. Should they like to take tea in the dining room, they were met with an impressive selection of sandwiches and cakes, or if one chose, they could enjoy the meal in the comfort of their own room.

And so, Sophia spent the better part of the day just like that. She read her book as hungrily as she ate her cucumber and salmon sandwiches.

She was pleased that she had spent the afternoon in repose, for the evening would prove to be quite alive with entertainment, gossip and general carousing. Arabella helped her to prepare, changing her morning gown for a silver *ensemble* that made Sophia appear to be a fine, gilded stature. Gold and crystal embellishments hung from her ears and were strategically placed in her curls. Soft pink gloves completed the outfit.

"A vision," Arabella said, the preparations being done.

"I thank you," Sophia replied politely.

The dining room had been utterly transformed. The round tables had been removed and the space was expansive, allowing for dance and socialising. There was a four-piece orchestra playing on a stage, and waiters walked about greeting guests with flutes of champagne and trays of exquisite finger food.

Other refreshments were displayed on a side table where guests had the opportunity to serve themselves. Sophia was grateful for the light repast, considering the tower of delicacies she had been served at teatime.

Sophia took a moment to feel sorry for her companions down below. There was Aunt Emily, of course, whom she had not seen all day. Then there were the lower classes who were not invited to attend such a grand ball. Were they down below her that very moment, looking up and dreaming of what others could freely enjoy? Sophia thought that it must be so.

Just then, Sophia felt something knock into her side and she jumped.

"I do apologise," Lord Timothy said, shock written upon his face. No doubt he was surprised that he had run into his future wife so unexpectedly.

“Quite all right,” Sophia replied, as though talking to a stranger.

Lord Timothy looked down at Sophia’s dress and then looked away, as though having been caught staring.

“Lovely evening,” he said coolly, not remarking upon Sophia’s appearance.

“Isn’t it?” she replied, looking out at the starry night sky. Although in her estimation, those glittering jewels in the black sky could not compare to the jewels that were glittering in that ballroom. In fact, Sophia was sure that the most expensive accessories in all the world were to be found in that very room. All the pirates of the sea would be more than happy to know the location of the SS *Duchess of Gloucester* in that moment.

“Would you care to dance?” Lord Timothy asked, and Sophia was shocked. She never dreamed that he would ask such a thing, considering his coolness towards her.

“Of course,” she replied.

They were cordial as they danced, and Sophia could not help but admire Lord Timothy’s handsomeness. He was wearing a fine navy-blue coat and tails, as was the fashion. His blond hair was as Titan as ever. There was a cleanness and freshness to his appearance, which Sophia admired, and he smelt of expensive soap. Yes, she did find her future husband’s exterior to be pleasing enough, but she knew nothing of his interior and wondered if she ever would. Was there even much of an interior to know?

They danced two dances, which was appropriate for a future married couple. Had they not been bound to one another in any way, to enjoy a second dance after the first would have caused a scandal.

They pleasantly carried on, making polite conversation here and there.

“A lovely crowd,” Lord Timothy said.

“Very refined,” Sophia replied.

“The little beef pastries are delicious. I recommend them,” he added.

“I shall have to try them.”

There was no admiration on Lord Timothy’s part of Sophia’s apparel, nor her movement during the dance. There were no compliments paid. By the end of the second dance, Sophia felt nearly invisible in her future husband’s presence.

And so, when Lord Timothy gave Sophia a bow and excused himself to go and speak with some gentlemen friends, Sophia sighed to herself. What a bore.

She felt terrible for thinking it, but it was the truth. Lord Timothy was dashing, and a little vacant, in her estimation. But could she be sure? There was always the chance that perhaps he was concealing his true self for reasons that Sophia did not know. Perhaps he didn’t wish to offend her, or he was merely behaving as he ought for a future duke who was marrying an heiress for her money.

Whatever the reason for Lord Timothy’s blandness, Sophia thought that she ought to not concern herself with it. The ball grew tiresome and Sophia found that she wanted to do something else. Namely, she wished to return to her book.

And so, without informing her maid, Sophia left the ballroom and returned to her cabin where her book was dutifully waiting for her. She lit a taper by the side of her bed and spent a pleasant rest of the

evening reading about the Medici family of Florence. Arabella eventually brought her a biscuit to enjoy while she read.

Sophia read for some time before there was a knock at her door. Thinking that her dress was not appropriate, she ignored it, only to hear the knock once more. Thinking that it could not be prevented, Sophia got up from where she sat and gently opened the door a crack, exposing the face of Lord Timothy on the other side.

“M’Lord?” Sophia said, uncertain as to why he was paying a call at that hour.

“May I come in?” he asked.

“Indeed.”

From the way that the future duke was walking, Sophia suspected that he was perhaps a tad drunk. Was that to be a prelude to the future? She wondered.

“I have to apologise to you, My Lady,” Lord Timothy said, pushing back his tails and seating himself.

“What for?” Sophia replied.

“For my distance.”

Sophia’s heart was suddenly warmed. The distance was all too clear, but she never imagined for a moment that he would confess to it.

“The marriage was not my idea,” Lord Timothy plainly confessed.

“I did not assume that it was.”

“And please understand that I shall . . . try to warm myself to you.”

Warm himself to her? Sophia thought it was a rather strange thing to say. Yet still, she appreciated the effort at communication.

“Most kind.”

“You are to meet my family quite soon,” Lord Timothy said, cheeks flushed. “I fear that I have not explained them to you yet.” Lord Timothy went to pull something from his pocket, and as he did so, the item came tumbling out on to the floor. He leaned over to pick it up and began to fall.

“Let me get it,” Sophia said, picking up what turned out to be a small portrait of the Clumber men.

Sophia examined it. The father stood in the centre, with two men flanking him. She recognised one of them to be Lord Timothy, but the other one was quite a mystery.

“Who is this?” Sophia asked, pointing to the mysterious man.

Lord Timothy narrowed his eyes and inspected the portrait.

“That is my brother,” he said with a huff.

“Your brother?”

“Yes, unfortunately you’ll be meeting him as well.”

“He has a kind face,” Sophia reasoned.

“And a bastard’s heart. His name is Philip.”

Sophia continued to look at the figure of Philip in the portrait. Although Lord Timothy was handsome, Philip could be said to be downright dashing. He took her breath away, and Sophia quickly handed the portrait back to Lord Timothy so that she wouldn’t be caught staring.

“I must go,” Lord Timothy said, putting the portrait back in his pocket.

“Goodnight, M’Lord,” Sophia said softly.

“Goodnight, Lady Sophia.”

Although a little awkward, Sophia found it touching that Lord Timothy felt the need to come to her room, even if he was a tad drunk.

As she lay in bed that night, feeling the boat gently rock, she couldn’t get the image of Philip out of her mind. Where Lord Timothy’s eyes were steely, Philip’s were kind.

Want to read the rest of the story? Check out the book on Amazon!

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